

原作イラスト 末次由紀
時海結以

小説

ちはやふる

中学生編



Chihayafuru: Middle School

Volume 1

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Prologue – After Spring

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– The city of Fuchuu, situated by the Tama River in Tokyo.

The wind, so serious it could wake someone wake up, had been blowing since morning. In Higashi-Oosato Middle School's schoolyard, surrounded by sakura trees in full bloom, the blizzard of pedals, mixed with sand, was burying the grounds in white.

This year, spring had come a bit late. A few days after the start of August, the flowers had started to scatter their petals.

It was the day after entrance ceremony in the classroom for class 1-3, before morning homeroom began. The students were lively, perhaps relieved because they had arrived safely at their classroom after braving the strong wind.

At the desk determined by class number which was two seats from the front of the classroom on the window side, Ayase Chihaya was repeating the words that were playing through her headphones from her portable music player.

<hisakata no
hikari no dokeki
haru no hi ni
shizu gokoro naku
hana no chiruran>

(In these spring days
with the tranquil light encompassing
the four directions,
why should the blossoms scatter
with uneasy hearts?)

What a lovely voice, thought Chihaya, enthralled. Strong and carefree, steady with clear pronunciation, and clear personality in each consonant –

‘Ayase-san, right? What’re you listening to?’

Suddenly, somebody hit her sailor-uniformed shoulder. Her new sailor uniform was starchy and stiff.

‘Eh?’

Two of her new female classmates, whom Chihaya still didn’t remember the names or faces of, were peering at her with curiosity.

'Let me listen too! I'll listen to anything if it's by an idol.'

One of the girls snatched the headphones without Chihaya's permission.

<kimi ga tame
haru no no ni idete
wakana tsumu
waga koromede ni
yuki wa furitsutsu>

(For my lord's sake,
I went out into the fields of spring
to pick young greens
while on my robe-sleeves
the snow kept falling and falling.)

The girl who put the headphones on her ears made an obvious grimace.

'Wha... What is this!?'

'The Hyakunin Isshu by certified reader Igarashi. A great voice, right?'

'Ah...'

Chihaya had taken these poems from a CD that she begged her parents to get her as congratulations for entering middle school. It was a recitation of the Hyakunin Isshu by a pro reader, though even a 'pro' probably didn't make that much money.

Chihaya's parents had been worried that a CD read by an expert on the Hyakunin Isshu would be expensive, but once they found out it was much cheaper than even a best album of J-Pop, they bought Chihaya one CD by a male reader and one CD by a female reader. This CD was Chihaya's favourite, so she didn't want to let go of it even for a moment.

'Hey, want to play karuta together? Competitive karuta. You know the Hyakunin Isshu, right?' said Chihaya excitedly.

The two girls looked at each other blankly, but then they burst out laughing. Their expressions turned cold. The girl with the headphones thrust them back at Chihaya.

'Why karuta? Like I'd do that.'

'It's old and I don't get it. I just forced myself to remember them in elementary 'cause it was for school.'

'What's so good about it? I don't get it at all.'

'Ayase-san, you're strange.'

They said all they wanted and then left.

Eh...? Why? Chihaya was the one who wanted to ask.

(Even though karuta's really interesting and so much fun. By thinking up strategies with friends and seriously competing to become stronger, you can compete with adults and even win. Men, women, age – it doesn't matter.)

Giving it her all and focussing on only one thing – that was the only method chihaya knew.

The one who had taught her that was a boy who had been by her side for only four months. It had been already twenty days since they parted.

A boy she had a promise with – that they could meet one day if they continued karuta – Wataya Arata. Though she felt like the day they parted was as fresh as yesterday, as days passed without their meeting, it felt like it had been months or years ago...

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“I think Ayase-san has a talent for karuta.”

Arata's calm eyes, seen through his glasses, and his words in the accent of his hometown, Fukui, were so recent, but it felt so nostalgic.

“Arata, Taichi, let's play karuta together forever.”

“Tha... thank you for playing karuta together with me... Chihaya, Taichi. We probably won't meet again.”

“Why not? Can't we meet again as long as we have karuta? If we continue karuta, we'll see each other again. Definitely.”

It was the first time Chihaya had promised something from the bottom of her heart. A promise more important to her than anything –

The bell for homeroom rang and the female homeroom teacher came in. The students noisily sat in their seats. The headphones were pulled off of Chihaya's dazed head.

'Ayase-san! This is against the school rules. The school rules are clear about not bringing things that aren't related to class. I'll take this, so come to the staffroom after school.'

'B-but – '

'Listen. You're a middle school student now? You're not an elementary school student any more – recognise that. Look at your student handbook again. Do you understand?'

Chihaya was in a panic when her music player was about to be taken from her, and she accidentally pushed the volume button. Sound blasted out of her headphones.

<... wa

utsuri ni keru na
itazura ni>

(...wers
has faded indeed
in vain)

'A prank.'

'A prank? Is Ayase making fun of the teacher?'

The boys' voices stirred up the classroom.

'N-no, I'm not! That's not what I – '

However, when Chihaya hesitantly looked at her homeroom teacher's eyes, her teacher wasn't smiling at all.

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After school, Chihaya was scolded at length by her homeroom teacher, who said, 'This is middle school. It's different from elementary.' On top of being forced to read the school rules in her student handbook aloud, she was forced to write a three-page reflection letter on how she would never bring her music player to school again and would live her middle school life seriously.

Relieved that she received her music player upon handing over her reflection letter, Chihaya jogged to the municipal cultural centre near the closest station. Though it was a hand-me-down from her older sister, her music player was important to her.

(Thank goodness. I didn't know there were so many school rules. Some of them feel kind of strange. What era was it when they wrote the rule 'Don't enter the rice paddies when commuting to school'?)

There was practice for a karuta group here. There were a number of karuta societies within the city, but Chihaya belonged to the Shiranami Society, which had the chairman. From evening to night on Monday and Thursday and the afternoon on Saturday and Sunday when there weren't competitions, they had practice matches in the large Japanese-style room.

Chihaya was still E-kyuu, a beginner. During the elementary school karuta team competition about one month ago, she had participated in a team with Arata and her childhood friend Mashima Taichi, but they had lost.

At the beginner individual competition during summer vacation as well, Chihaya had only one win and had lost the third match. She hoped for best eight but didn't reach best four, so she couldn't hope to go up a level. On the other hand, Taichi had won and had swiftly advanced to D-kyuu.

Chihaya's current goal was to reach D-kyuu during the competition before Golden Week. It would be impossible to leave E-kyuu unless she perfectly memorised all the kimariji for the hundred cards. Competitive karuta started from perfect memorisation.

(Taichi said his classes started today. It takes him an hour and a half to get to school so he'll be late for practice. Seems like he's adding more cram classes too... I wonder if I'll be able to see him.)

Though Chihaya had been prepared for this... her curfew was seven at night. As expected, Taichi didn't show up for practice.

'Chihaya-chan, don't you have to go soon?' asked Harada-sensei, the chairman of Shiranami Society. Chihaya had the cards flipped over in rows on the tatami and was taking them alone to test her memory. There were three left.

'Mm... After I get them all...'

To move to the next song, the remainder of the poem on the taken card was read out. The two of them were silent.

The members gathered here were in pairs for matches, so the first part of the read poems was followed by the echoing claps of cards being taken. The sound made when the dry tatami was hit was pleasant.

'I want to practice a bit more, but...'

Maybe Sensei would call home for her... He could say she would be late because they had special practice today.

'Are you waiting for Matsuge-kun?'

'Eh...? Yeah...'

With long eyelashes and a pretty face, if one had to say, Taichi had been nicknamed 'Matsuge-kun' by Harada-sensei. Sensei was a man past fifty who had a strong body and always wore a shirt in the style of a short kimono with matching pants – a monk's working clothes – when playing karuta. When it came to karuta, he saw nothing else, and he taught Chihaya with fervour. He was very good at looking out for Chihaya.

Chihaya liked Harada-sensei much more than her teacher from elementary school. Harada-sensei always looked straight at Chihaya's eyes and gave advice with love from his whole person. There was no other teacher like him.

Harada-sensei's glasses had a glint in them.

'Chihaya-chan, did something happen at school?'

'Er... n-no.'

Chihaya shook her head.

'There's no karuta club... so I don't plan on joining a club. Can I come here a lot instead?'

'Oh, sounds good! We'll welcome you with open arms.'

She'd definitely find friends who would play karuta with her on days that the Shiranami Society didn't have practice. She hadn't asked everyone in her class yet, and there were other classes too. That was what Chihaya thought.

(I just managed to run into some people with no interest. It was just a coincidence. Not everyone's like that. There're definitely people like Taichi who'll play karuta with me.)

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However.

utsuri ni keru na
itazura ni –

(has faded indeed
in vain –)

Spring fled by with the time. Chihaya didn't make regular friends, only alone ones who enjoyed karuta.

She spoke up to anyone when given a chance – 'Let's play karuta! It's really interesting.' – and spread the cards on her desk, but this made everyone put her at a distance. By the time she'd noticed, two months had passed and she was already completely left out of the group.

There were already groups of friends, but when they had to change clothes, Chihaya had no group to go to.

The only enjoyment Chihaya had was the practice days at the Shiranami Society. Getting to D-kyuu one month after Taichi really was fun. When she heard the kimariji, her hands moved instinctively – she couldn't believe it would be so thrilling.

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It was the rainy season.

When class ended, Chihaya ran up the gentle slope to the cultural centre and went to the reception, panting.

'Hi, are Hyoro-kun and the others already here?'

Hyoro-kun was a boy the same age as Chihaya. His real name was Kinashi Hiro. Since he had already been coming to the Shiranami Society for years, he acted like a senpai to Chihaya and Taichi, but recently, he had been coming to practice late, like Taichi.

'Ah, Hyoro-kun said he can't come for the next little while. The elementary school kids said they'd stop too since they have middle school entrance exams,' said the woman at reception.

'Eh?'

'Hyoro-kun's middle school has a karuta club, so he's probably focusing on that.'

'I see... He went to Hokuou Academy, right?'

'A combined private middle and high school... Their high school is one of the contenders to win the national high school karuta competition – but Chihaya-chan, you already know that, don't you?'

'Ah, yes, I've heard.'

The woman took out the key to the Japanese-style room, but she played with it in her fingers.

'The adults start at six, and nobody's here yet. It'll just be you there right now, but will you use the room?'

Though Chihaya nodded and took the key, when she opened the sliding doors, the large room was empty. On this cloudy afternoon in the rainy season, the light through the folding screens was dim, and the humid air was a bit dusty. It was the smell of damp tatami.

'Just me...'

Chihaya felt the room was larger than usual as she opened the box that had 'kakitsubata' written on it in permanent marker to differentiate the set of cards... After lining them up neatly, she suddenly felt empty. It was really quiet. Nobody was coming.

She bit her lips and gathered the cards, moving to a corner in the back. The warning sound from the crossroads outside the window sounded very loud.

'Even Hyoro-kun isn't coming. Ah...'

Today, Chihaya would only have adults to play with. She would have to wait until later for them to arrive too. Even if Taichi came, he would be even later than the adults.

'Taichi... I wonder if I won't see him today either... I want to see him. Why can't we meet even though we live so close... Taichi.'

Right now, Taichi felt as far as Arata, who lived in the prefecture of Fukui.

As Chihaya flipped the cards which just had the latter half of the poems written on them, she did two-minute practices, saying the kimariji for the beginning of the poems. Then, she replayed the reading in her head as she acted it out, taking phantom cards... That was the sort of practice she could do alone. She could do this at home – anywhere. Unable to focus concentrate on image training alone, Chihaya shut the folding screen and gazed at the cloudy sky.

'Taichi could just skip cram school today. He could say, "I think it's going to rain and I don't have an umbrella."'

Chihaya knew herself that it was an impossible wish.

'Even though karuta is definitely way more fun than cram school. I mean, Taichi looked so tired.'

Though it had just been a few days since Chihaya saw that tired face, she couldn't remember it.

'Taichi...'

Taichi's Chapter - Within this World, There is, Indeed, No Path



1 – arashi fuku (where the tempests blow)

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This was in April, just after middle school had begun.

(No way... Th... This can't be.)

In the first-year classroom corridor of Kaimeisei, a private middle school, Mashima Taichi experienced a humiliation worse than any he had experienced before. He was in a cold sweat.

One week after the beginning of middle school, the results for the elementary school four courses proficiency test that occurred the previous day were put up on the corridor wall. Names and combined scores were displayed in order.

No matter how many times Taichi rubbed his eyes, the results didn't change.

10. Class 5 – Mashima Taichi – 397 points

Tenth place. Even though he had only been wrong on two questions, he was in tenth place. Taichi, who had always been in first place in elementary school and at his cram school, was in tenth place.

(It was a pretty difficult test... I thought I was OK.)

If they just counted the points, Taichi was in fourth, but there were students with the same scores. One person had a full 400 points. There were two in second with 399 points, with three in fourth at 398 points, and then there were four people, including Taichi, at 397 points. Normally, it would probably have been written as seventh place, but this school was strict and had the places displayed as first, third, sixth and tenth.

As well, the other students in tenth place came earlier in the class and name order than Taichi, so his name was tenth, just like the number.

He could see his mother's angry face already. His chest felt tight. Taichi's mother wouldn't allow anything but first. She cared so much about taking first place that she would abandon a competition from the beginning if she knew it would be a loss.

(Who got first with full points?)

With mortification so great that it made him shudder, Taichi looked at the name of the student in first.

1. Class 5 – Hirai Harutaka – 400 points

The student who sat right in front of Taichi, whose attendance number also came right before his. There just happened to be only two students in class 5 whose family names started with H – Hamasaki and Hirai – so Mashima came afterwards.

Hirai was slender, tall and had long hair that also showed signs of bed head – he had an easygoing impression to him.

“My name's written with kanji that are nooormally read as Yuuki, but you read it Harutaka,” he had said in a clear, prepubescent voice, like that of a female character in an anime, during his self-introduction which had been strangely stretched out.

(A low-key guy like that... What do you call it... ‘No ambition.’ Losing to someone like that... Damn it, I was careless.)

This was an elite private boys' school. Several prime ministers and distinguished scholars had been produced here – a school with tradition. This wasn't some public middle school which took in whatever students were in the area. This wasn't Taichi's local municipal Higashi-Oosato Middle School. Only the excellent boys who were chosen gathered here, from all the prefectures of Japan.

(Didn't I understand that already?)

While Taichi was being irritated with himself, he heard a carefree voice from behind him.

'Mashima-kuuun, if you don't move, you'll be late!'

When Taichi turned around, he saw Hirai standing there. The other students had already started moving.

'Wonder what we'll do in "liberal arts" anyway?'

Hirai smiled in a friendly manner as he talked freely to Mashima.

(What's up with this guy? He's being too friendly – don't look so happy 'cause you got full marks.)

Taichi was irritated.

'I don't know.'

Taichi walked past Hirai and went towards the third lecture hall, where the liberal arts class was held. Hirai ran up to walk beside him.

'Mashima-kun, do you remember me? I finally remembered after thinking about it for a week after the entrance ceremony.'

(What's this guy saying?)

Taichi glared at Hirai's kind-looking... or rather, relaxed face that was thrust in front of his eyes.

'I said I don't know.'

'You went to a skill-developing class for two-year-olds before entering kindergarten, right? Since I lived in Tama then, next to Fuchuu, I was in the same class, and we played and sang together.'

Hirai happily grabbed Taichi's hands.

'It's been so long! I'm happy, since I liked you a lot, Mashima-kun! Remember? We liked the picture book called "Working Machines" so we put our toys together and got along really well when we played with building blocks – '

'You remember things from when you were two? Stop acting so gross.'

Taichi shook off Hirai's hand in a fit of anger, but Hirai's smile didn't falter.

But I'm happy we could meet again. Let's get along, OK?'

(Ack, this guy's the worst – he's seriously gross. I don't want to deal with him. I lost to a guy like this?)

Taichi felt weary and dejected.

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In a classroom with long desks and stairs, just like one at a university, there was an elderly male teacher whose white hair stood out. He was in charge of liberal arts. The staff member who was there handed out books that were smaller than textbooks to all the students.

The paperback cover read *Ise Monogatari*.

'In liberal arts, which occurs once a week, we will study natural science and classic literature every other week. My name is Fujiwara, and I am in charge of classic literature. This class does not have exams.'

A number of students' eyes lit up.

'Please show me your notes thrice a year and write a report. That is all. As liberal arts is a class to teach you how to think rather than the skills for taking entrance exams, everything you write is correct, so long as you have thought as much as you can on it. However, you will be given a demerit if you only hand in secondhand knowledge. The material for the classic literature class is *Ise Monogatari*, which has just been handed out to you.'

Ise Monogatari – Taichi had heard the title before, but he knew neither the author nor the story. Fujiwara-sensei wrote 'Ariwara Narihira' skillfully on the blackboard.

'Do you know the Hyakunin Isshu? "Chihayaburu kamiyo mo kikazu tatsugawa kara kurenai ni mizu kukuru to wa" (Unheard of even in the legendary age of the awesome gods: Tatsuya River in scarlet and the water flowing under it) – Ariwara no Narihira, the composer of this poem in the Hyakunin Isshu, is the protagonist of this story.'

(Chihayaburu – !)

The face of Taichi's too energetic childhood friend flashed through his mind. Ayase Chihaya... They became classmates when they changed classes in the third year of elementary school and had been in the same class during the next class change in grade five. The girl had studied in the same classroom as him for four years.

The poem "Chihayaburu" from the Hyakunin Isshu had been tied to Chihaya by Wataya Arata, a bespectacled boy who joined their class from Fukui Prefecture at the end of autumn in their sixth year. Arata had been the top of Japan for five years straight at the elementary school competitions for competitive karuta.

Chihaya adored the speed with which Arata took karuta cards, and Taichi, filled with a desire not to lose, had been wrapped up at some point by Chihaya and Arata's pace and grown to like karuta

himself.

No... He had grown to like taking karuta cards with Chihaya and Arata, the three of them.

Arata had returned to his hometown upon graduating. A friend who was only with him for three months. An important friend, whom Taichi had made a vow with in tears – that he would definitely never forget him, and that they would meet again.

While Taichi was thinking, Fujiwara suddenly called on him.

'First, shall we read the introductory comments? Mashima-kun.'

Though Taichi had heard his name, he didn't return from his thoughts. He was reminiscing to escape from the reality of tenth place that was eddying in his chest.

'Mashima-kun?'

'Eh, ah, "chiha" is "kara", and "chigirio" and "chigiriki" are tomofuda – '

'Oh, kimariji, I see. It appears you are knowledgeable about the Hyakunin Isshu – I have high expectations. Now, what did I tell you to do?'

'Ah... eh? ... Sorry, I'll read the commentary.'

Taichi hurriedly flipped the pages of the paperback. It was because Hirai, sitting next to at the long table, had written 'Read the commentary' on the corner of his notebook and silently pushed it towards him.

(Hmph, I heard that much – does he want to make me owe him one?)

The truth was that Taichi hadn't heard... perhaps, but in Taichi's heart, he was sure that he had. His feelings for Hirai changed from 'gross' to 'maddening'.

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The first liberal arts class was more interesting than Taichi had thought it would be. Fujiwara-sensei – it seemed he was a prestigious professor from the university affiliated with Kaimeisei – was skilful at lectures and understood what kind of person Narihira was very well.

Arihira no Narihira was a noble born in the ninth century who lived in the Heian era. His father was the grandson of Emperor Kanmu, the start of the Heian era, and his mother was that emperor's daughter. He was given the name Ariwara from the imperial line. As a beautiful young man, a man with many passionate loves, and a writer of waka, his name was passed on through history.

Narihira's name did not appear in Ise Monogatari. The protagonist was only identified as a 'man', but from other records, it was clear that the man was modeled after Narihira.

(It seems like it won't be too hard to write notes if I focus on listening. It'll be an easy class! But I'm not sure about not having tests – I won't be able to see my results. Would it be better to take this class

seriously...? Well, I'll just go with the flow.)

That was what Taichi decided.

After school that day, the students were allowed to observe clubs and provisionally join them. At this school, it was the students' duty to join a club. Clubs outside of class that had meetings four days a week – he would have to join the association of students as well.

Taichi headed towards the soccer club practice area without any hesitation... and then he was caught by Hirai again.

'Mashima-kuuun! Mashima-kun, are you joining the soccer club too? I'm joining too!'

(He's so annoying.)

Taichi changed into his shoes at the entrance and tried to dash past Hirai, but Hirai happily ran after him, talking all the while.

'There was a pamphlet with the school policies, right? If we stick to our desks and just study for entrance exams, it would have a bad influence on us after we become adults and join society, so we need to experience "camaraderie", it said. Is this school full of bookworms?'

'Aren't you a bookworm yourself!? With your full marks.'

Taichi yelled out without thinking.

'Eh? I just like to think. Answering questions mechanically and writing and memorizing bunches – it's a pain. I hate it. For memorization, if I just look at a book, I can keep it in my head like with a photo, and I can look at those photos in my head,' replied Hirai in a casual tone, saying things that didn't make sense. It made Taichi irritated.

'... You're really strange. Keep away from me!'

'Yeah, people call me strange a lot. Saying I'm strange for not trying hard. Everyone who studies really hard... they call me strange.'

Hirai looked a bit lonely. Taichi took that chance to speak before running off.

'Don't make fun of people who try hard!' he yelled.

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At Kaimeisei Middle School's affiliated high school, their motto was 'the pen and the sword', and their baseball, soccer and martial arts were national level. One of the reasons Taichi wanted to come to Kaimeisei was this motto. Starting from middle school, they had the university course and physical education course, and Taichi had joined the university course.

Every day, Taichi took one hour and a half one-way to go from Fuchuu to this school, which was in the city. The new cram schools he had started going to was in the city on the way back. An English

school and a science school focusing on entrance exams – in Taichi’s family, his father and his grandfather were both doctors, and Taichi felt like he would become a doctor himself in the future at this rate.

He did think that adding a club to his daily life would probably make it difficult for him to go to the Shiranami Society, but joining a club was his duty, and he was also looking forward to it.

Taichi changed into a jersey and went to the field where the soccer club was practicing. The club members were already stretching to warm up.

The male coach named Ono appeared and gave instructions, which made the club members line up with soccer balls. It appeared they would start practice.

– Then, Taichi squinted.

(Eh... dribble tag? What I first played when I joined the junior soccer school in my second year of elementary school?)

The club members were dribbling and playing tag with the ball happily. Then, they did a dribble relay, and then shooting. To Taichi, it just looked like something young elementary school students would play.

(Eh... Is the soccer club this low level?)

'Looks like fun.'

At some point, Hirai had come up to Taichi. His eyes were shining.

'Hirai, are you OK with this?'

'Yeah. I mean, everyone looks lively, like they really enjoy this club.'

'Are you OK with just playing around? I see. You hate trying hard, after all.'

If that was the case, he’d be able to beat Hirai in club. Taichi was sure of it. He had been on the soccer team for five years in elementary school. It had been a high level team.

During the break, Coach Ono gathered the first-years who had to come to observe. There were thirty. There were a fair number who looked a bit troubled, like Taichi.

'For the athletic clubs for students on the university course, they all have practice for two hours after school except for Wednesday, which is the day set for student association. You will be able to attend one for an hour soon. The goal of the athletic clubs is to correct a lack in exercise and to create a healthy body. There will also be competitive matches if you wish for them.'

(If we wish for them? You normally practise for matches, don’t you? To fix a lack in exercise??)

Coach Ono continued, as if he had seen the question on Taichi’s face.

'Students who want to participate in serious athletic clubs can participate in the physical education course clubs, but they have to pass the selection test for those clubs and be a substitute... you'll be in the alternate team.'

(In short, we get to play around in the university course sports while the physical education course students have the real athletics clubs. The strong Kaimeisei soccer club that other schools think of was the physical education course one.)

Taichi understood why the students in the club looked like they were playing around.

'The selection test occurs two weeks after club entrance. For those who want to join the club, please contact me within three days.'

'Could I ask a question?'

One of the students raised a hand. It was Hirai.

'How many students can move to the physical education course club? Please tell me the actual numbers.'

(Ah, I want to know too... but why's Hirai asking?)

Coach Ono smiled wryly.

'If I say that, the number of people who attempt the test will drop. In the past ten years, the number of students who went there.... about one a year, maybe? Students who have to keep up grades for the university course can't keep up with the physical education course practice.'

'In short, joining the physical education course club can't be a reason for letting your grades drop.'

'To put it frankly, yes. Though it isn't a rule, it's an unwritten one. If your grades drop too much, it'll be suggested that you leave the club. There hasn't been a university course student who joined the top regular team from the alternate team in over ten years. Somebody who could do that really would become a legend of the pen and the sword. Well, since it is a chance, at least try the selection test,' Coach Ono said lightly, which made many of the club hopefuls look down. Hirai, who asked the question, was the only one nodding and smiling.

'One person might get in? Really?'

'Hirai, are you seriously going to try the selection test?' murmured Taichi.

'Yeah, I want to – sounds fun!' Hirai replied with a smile.

'If it's only one a year, I won't let you get in. I'm better – I've practiced all this time.'

'Ah, a rival declaration, so cool! Hey, hey – can I see that awesome practice of yours?'

'... No way. Instead of watching somebody else practise, practise yourself. Or are you saying it's going to be easy for you?'

'I don't really know... I'm just doing what I do normally.'

'You really are strange.'

Taichi left Hirai, who had become quiet, and headed towards the meeting room to fill in the form to join the club.

(His thoughtless attitude pisses me off. Why'd I lose to a guy like that in the test? I'll definitely get him back next time... Right, if I pass the selection before the next test, it'll prove that I'm the best at soccer in the university course. Much better than Hirai, and people will call me the legendary man of the pen and sword.)

Taichi smirked. The man of legend – it was kind of cool.

'OK – I'll take the selection test, pass and aim to be a legend!'

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Taichi's mother was waiting for him when he got home.

'Taichi, how were the results of the proficiency test? It was fine, right? Since you were able to do most of it.'

'... Tenth place... same as being seventh in the year. Since I was three points from full marks.'

Even if Taichi lied, he would be reprimanded terribly once his mother found out. That was why Taichi was always honest. He didn't make any excuses.

'Tenth!'

His mother's eyes flashed open and she held a hand to her head, as if she felt faint.

'There was a boy with full marks!? So there was somebody who was doing things properly?'

His mother understood once she saw the question sheet that Taichi brought back that the problems were much more difficult than ones from a public school, but after hearing that there was somebody with full marks despite that, she started lecturing Taichi at length, saying that his study habits were having a bad effect on his marks and that he should use his commute time more efficiently.

(I'm trying too. It's not my fault that there are guys like Hirai.)

After the excruciating lecture, Taichi found a chance to respond.

'I'll do better next time for the proficiency test after the Golden Week study camp.'

'A twelve-hour-per-day study camp, right? Everyone participates in that, so you have to study more than everyone else in order to beat them. Study so that you can get full marks every time – definitely don't make any careless mistakes.'

'Yes,' Taichi said with an obedient nod. Then:

'Mum, I also want to talk about club activities. Students are required to join, so... I'm thinking of joining the soccer club. But the university course club is just like playing games, so I'm thinking of taking the selection test to join the proper physical education course club.'

When Taichi explained that he wouldn't be able to do that unless he was the top of the university course, his mother's displeased expression softened slightly.

'First, do that. You can do it, Taichi.. You were an ace but you stopped junior soccer and little league – I think it's too bad.'

When Taichi was in elementary school, he had had soccer on Saturday and baseball on Sunday.

'Especially soccer – I thought that you'd be able to join the J2 junior team, but it's too much to have that and your university-headed school. There's no adult who works as a doctor at a university hospital but also represents Japan on the soccer team.'

Since Taichi didn't have the energy to keep up with his mother's ambitions, he let them slide.

If Taichi had to choose between baseball and soccer, he would definitely choose soccer. Though you couldn't force people who couldn't bat to be batters, in soccer, you could get your teammates top ass you the ball. You just had to make yourself seem like the most dependable guy.

'Don't lose to the physical education students in club either. You can do it.'

Taichi told his mother, who seemed sure that he would be selected for the team, that he would go study and went to his room.

'A strategy to pass the selection test... First, I'll stand out in practice. I'll make everyone nervous.'

(When somebody does lifting ten times, I'll do it twenty times in front of them. If somebody gets ten balls in, I'll get twenty... Well, not that I care about Hirai, who's just playing around.)

Taichi placed a hand on the poster of a soccer player that he had put on the wall and made a vow to himself.

'I'll work hard. I hate guys like Hirai. Making fun of people who work hard. I'll win and be the best at sports in the university course. I'll show him that I'm right!'

-

Halfway through April, Taichi had finished club and cram school. It was completely dark by the time he could finally show up at the Shiranami Society. It was the first time he had come since starting middle school.

'Taichi! You finally came!'

Chihaya looked like she had been waiting for him forever as she ran up. It was the first time Taichi

had seen her in a sailor uniform. The municipal Higashi-Oosato Middle School was right by Higashi-Oosato Elementary, so many children in the area went there. That meant that Taichi was used to seeing the uniform. However, when Chihaya wore it, it was novel, and Taichi felt a bit embarrassed.

Chihaya also seemed to find Taichi's blazer uniform and necktie unusual for a moment, since the municipal middle school had the traditional Japanese gakuran for the male uniform.

'Taichi, Taichi! Let's play already! School is so boring – nobody will play karuta with me.'

'They probably just think you're annoying because you're so pushy about it.'

Taichi could tell from how Chihaya had stuck right by Harada-sensei and the adults at the Shiranami Society during spring break. Chihaya was anxious – she wanted to fill the hole that Arata had left in her heart and to catch up to Arata as quickly as she could.

'Eh, really? I just keep telling them how interesting it is.'

Exactly, Taichi murmured inwardly. When he saw Chihaya's expressions flash by, for some reason, he felt like a weight was lifted from his shoulders. It even made him feel nostalgic.

(This place makes me relaxed... Wait, why did I calm down after seeing Chihaya?)

'Oh, Matsuge-kun, you came. Want me to play with you?'

Harada-sensei, the chairman of the Shiranami Society, came up to them.

'No, Taichi's playing with me!'

Chihaya grabbed Taichi's arm, as if to say 'Like I'd let him go!' as she laid out the cards.

'I'm not going to lose, OK?'

'You plan on beating me, E-kyuu?'

'I'll be D-kyuu next time! I've practiced much more than you, Taichi.'

Their practices were like official matches, taking one hour each match. This was the last match of the day.

During competitive karuta matches, two people faced each other with fifty of the hundred Hyakunin Isshu cards between them, each lining twenty-five in front of them before starting. While the cards were read, if one of them was one of the poems in front of the player or the opponent, the player took them. If the card was taken from the opponent's side, the player sent one of their own cards. The one whose numbers of cards dropped to zero first was the winner.

Taichi beat Chihaya with a five-card difference.

'Ah, I lost! This sucks. Ah, I lost two cards on "yo no naka yo" (within this world), aahhh!'

Chihaya was rolling around on the tatami.

'Be quiet – matches are still going.'

'Matsuge-kun, you've improved.'

At some point, Harada-sensei had started watching from behind Taichi. He invited Taichi to the corridor to talk.

'Have you been practicing alone?'

Taichi shook his head.

'On the train in the morning, it's rush hour, so it's too crowded to even open a vocabulary book. I've been doing something like image training for karuta matches in my head to pass the time.'

'Wow, it sounds tough. Matsue-kun, you'll be in D-kyuu during the next competition – if you get into the best four, you'll be C-kyuu.'

'If I'm going in, I have to win...'

'First is a must' was Taichi's mother's motto – Harada-sensei knew that too.

'Do you still have some time? I'll teach you. I have ten more cards – thirty. Matsuge-kun, you have twenty. Want to try taking cards using Ariake to see what the card difference will be?'

Ariake was the name of a machine that automatically read the Hyakunin Isshu.

'Since you don't have your own flow yet, rather than a discussion after the match, I'll instruct you after each card.'

'Aw, I want to do it too,' said Chihaya sullenly. She watched as Harada-sensei's instructions began.

'Focus! Come on – attack the opponent's lower right row more! Aim for the cards more carefully – put your hand straight out without any unnecessary movements! Listen – okurifuda are cards that you can take with confidence! Ah, for cards the opponent sends you, you should – '

Even though Harada-sensei's instructions were strict, Taichi could feel Harada-sensei's feelings of support for his students in the way he taught. Taichi started staring at Harada-sensei without thinking.

'What is it, Matsuge-kun?'

'Harada-sensei, you're kind of... I was just thinking you were actually nice.'

'That so?' said Sensei, who pulled Taichi into a big hug. The strength of his arms was enough to make it hard for Taichi to breathe. Harada-sensei, who was actually a doctor, smelt slightly of disinfectant.

'Matsuge-kun, you're really a good kid!'

I love you too, Sensei!’ said Chihaya, joining them. Harada-sensei laughed heartily.

‘Go right at it!’ Harada-sensei instructed, and Taichi, who had turned serious, reached straight for the card at Sensei’s knees in a sink-or-swim play.

<asaborake u – >

(As the winter dawn breaks –)

It was an ooyamafuda. You couldn’t tell what the card was until six characters were read. Until you were sure, cover the card in your own lines – kakoite.

Taichi’s fingers stabbed Sensei’s fingers, which were cupped in a kakoite .

‘Ah, ouch.’

Taichi’s right middle finger and index finger stung.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. It’s fine. My fingers just hit yours.’

Taichi would feel bad if he made Sensei worry. He ended up holding back.

If his fingers didn’t move properly, he wouldn’t be able to hold a pencil... Taichi remembered how his mother had scolded him when he hurt his fingers during the spring vacation match, he had hurt his fingers. Taichi hoped that his mother wouldn’t find out if his fingers swelled up.

* * *

A few days after Taichi went to the karuta society, there was the soccer selection test. The supervisor and the coaches from the physical course soccer club came to judge. However, they didn’t look expectant at all. They looked annoyed with their arms crossed, like they were saying – we’re just here because you asked, so hurry up and finish this already.

There weren’t many people who wanted to take the selection test – just five first-years. Taichi and Hirai were among them.

(Hehe, I’m going to be the one who’s chosen. I’ll call things even for the proficiency test once you admit defeat, Hirai.)

When Taichi smirked, Hirai returned it with a friendly smile.

‘Let’s both do our best, Mashima-kun.’

‘... You’re going to say both even when only one person’s going to pass?’

‘There’s no rule that it has to be one. Though the actual data says that it’s about one person every two years, it’s not set in stone. I was impressed when I saw you practice – like how you handled the ball.

So let's both pass.'

'Of course I'm going to pass.'

Hirai nodded happily in response. Taichi held his head in his hands – Hirai didn't understand at all.

Coach Ono from the university course soccer club gathered the upper-level students and chose members.

'These five people and the third years are the white team, and the second-years will put on bibs to be the red team – we'll have a red-white half match for thirty minutes. You five, talk amongst yourselves and choose one goalie, two forwards and one midfielder. However, we might make you switch positions while playing.'

The five of them looked at each other.

'I'll be a forward,' Taichi said first. Hirai said he would be a midfielder afterwards. However, the remaining three members all wanted to be forwards so they kept grumbling – they couldn't come to a decision. (Midfielders needed to run about the most. Goalies had a lot of responsibility. Plus forwards got to show off their shooting abilities. That said, there's no way any of you will beat me, so just give up.)

Taichi made a suggestion in his irritation.

'Then let's decide by how many lifts we can do. People who last longer can choose first.'

'... Mashima, you're acting like our boss. What are you deciding things for?' said one person pointedly.

'You always try to stand out in practice too. You glare at the people who are slow.'

Another person put out his complaints, to which Taichi retorted, 'What? I just stand out 'cause you guys are weak.'

'You go out of your way to keep the ball two or three times longer than other people to show off – don't get ahead of yourself.'

'It's not like I want to show off lifts to you.'

'You'd just keep the ball for yourself without passing it to anyone during matches.'

'... Of course I wouldn't.'

Though Taichi said that, for a moment, he was startled.

'Can't we fight about this afterwards?' interrupted Hirai lazily, which made the mood even worse.

'Hey, don't you have a goalie? Nobody with experience?'

Coach Ono interrupted them, unable to watch.

(The goalie's special. If you try to show off in a position you're not used to, you'll get injured, but if you don't do anything, you won't pass the selection.)

Injuries... The goalie was the one position where you could damage your fingers by stopping the ball, even if it wasn't a rough play. Taichi had iced his finger overnight after injuring it during karuta and luckily, it hadn't been anything serious, but...

Taichi took a quick look around and saw everyone looking at their own dominant hands. It looked like they were thinking the same thing.

'Mashima, you look like you have soccer experience. Can you be goalie?' asked Coach Ono.

Taichi hurriedly shook his head. He didn't want to risk injury.

'I've never done it...'

Coach Ono kept asking, but nobody accepted.

'This is tough...'

'... Um, I'll do it, if you're all OK with me.'

Hirai was the one who spoke.

'I'm not really confident... Sorry.'

'OK, Hirai's goalie. Mashima, you're mid – go to the leader.'

Eh? Taichi was surprised, but he couldn't defy Coach Ono's instructions. It looked like Taichi was the only person who had been thinking about discussing strategy, as the other members quickly ran off to the pitch.

'Mashima-kuuun, let's get pumped up!'

Hirai called out in his usual relaxed voice to Taichi, who had been a step slower than everyone. It made Taichi feel exhausted.

'Hirai, you should get pumped up yourself.'

'Thanks. Mashima-kun, you've worked really hard, so you'll definitely get good results.'

(Ugh. You hate try-hards – must have said that on purpose. That's why I dislike you.)

Coach Ono took his position as referee and the red-white match for the selection test began.

-

Taichi, who had been told to be the leader for the white team, gave instructions to the third-years

about the formation. However, the third-year students wouldn't listen to him at all. In order to get the ball first, they left the middle field empty. Taichi had to run there himself.

(Why won't they listen? If they went from there to the right side, we could connect the passes and go for a quick attack. Think more about your positions on the team!)

Meanwhile, the second-years on the red team appeared to have a strategy. They shot the ball back and forth, running circles around the white team as they attacked.

The white team defence tended to run up to the ball, which left the area in front of the goal empty. Hirai, the goalie, had a one-on-one showdown with the red team player running up towards him after receiving a pass.

(Ah, they'll get a shot in!)

Taichi was trying to run towards the penalty area, fighting off another red team member as he did so, when the ball flew through the air.

(Shoot, there's no way Hirai'll catch that!)

But – Hirai's instincts and jump power stunned Taichi. Hirai leapt and easily reached the ball with his outstretched arm. He punched it down and caught it at chest height. Cries of admiration resounded throughout the pitch.

Afterwards, in the same way, Hirai continued to face opponents one on one. The tall Hirai caught all the shots that tried to sail over him. He reliably caught the balls on the sides too.

As the match continued, only Hirai was able to show off his abilities in the end.

(This was done on purpose, wasn't it? The upper-years and the coach made a plan to ignore me and make Hirai stand out. It doesn't make sense for goalie to be a position in a selection test. It would've been fine with just the field.)

Taichi felt suspicious.

(I didn't notice Hirai could do that 'cause of those excuses for practices.)

Taichi was the only one who stood out during practices, as was his plan. His dribbling and ball control had been outstanding. Since Hirai hadn't stood out, Taichi hadn't seen him, but...

(I didn't notice... That's all. I don't remember ever looking at his skills with the ball properly.)

It was because Taichi had been too engrossed in showing off his own skills to everyone.

There were only five minutes left to the first half. Taichi and the white team were clearly being crushed – they couldn't even touch the ball. Despite that, the match was still 0-0 because of Hirai's efforts.

(At this rate, I'll just have been running around for no reason.)

I need to get the ball – Taichi cut in front of a pass from an opponent and started dribbling. The red team defence rushed at him.

(OK, let's go!)

Taichi was about to make a long shot when his foot caught from behind him and he hit the ground – the hand of an opponent was underneath him. Taichi rolled across the field.

There was a whistle and a yellow card was thrust out.

'Eh... me? I...'

The card was being held out towards Taichi. The opponent was rubbing his shin, where Taichi had stepped on him. Of course, he didn't do it on purpose, but if he objected, he'd get the red card.

'I'm sorry,' said Taichi to the opponent, who was glaring at him. Taichi's calf was smarting. The opponent had kicked him, but Taichi was told that that had been reflexive from when Taichi's arm hit the opponent, and that was all.

'Mashima, switch. Hirai, you be leeder. The goalie...'

Coach Ono took a long look at Taichi and then called up a third-year alternate.

(I'm... being taken off? No way...!)

Taichi hit the ground with his fist. His whole body felt hot.

'Mashima-kun, take a break.'

Hirai held out a water bottle. Taichi was confused at first when he was given a bandage too, but then he noticed that his sock was bloody.

(Eh? Ow... It hurts...)

-

As Taichi washed the wound on his leg, he found that it was deeper than he thought. He disinfected it and stopped the bleeding with a bandage and tape. After looking at the injury, the pain doubled – Taichi felt miserable. Taichi chilled the injury as he watched the second half of the match from the bench.

(Tsk, now there's no way I'll pass the selection test.)

He didn't want to watch the rest of the match. What would he tell his mother... It hurt. It really hurt. Taichi felt useless and frustrated.

'Mashima, you sulking? Watch the match until the end,' scolded one of the third-year alternates. Two of them sandwiched Taichi between them, so Taichi, gritting his teeth, was forced to glare at the players on top of the pitch.

Hirai was running around the field. No, it was more like he was being forced to run.

(What, so that guy's no good either... Was I just thinking too much?)

That didn't make Taichi's frustration any lighter though.

(Why am I watching this from the bench? I want to leave.)

'That Hirai moves in an interesting way.'

Hirai ran up to the other members, said something, and then ran elsewhere again. Maybe because of his words, the other players started moving into advantageous positions.

(I wonder what he's saying.)

Taichi thought it strange, so he strained his ears and focussed on Hirai's lips.

'I'll leave it to you!' 'Could you go there for me?' 'That left area's open, so please watch over it!' 'If you'd do that for us, we'd all be grateful!' Hirai's words were like that.

(Was I... ordering them around...!? Go there, move faster, come right back – giving vague orders and making people not trust me.)

Taichi felt even more frustrated. Just from understanding Hirai's good points – ones he didn't have – he felt truly useless and didn't want to think about the way he had thought up until now.

(Soccer is a team sport... Being good at soccer means using your skills but also getting other people to use theirs... but realising that now is too late.)

Taichi held in the urge to stream. His legs were shaking.

'Hirai's good. He's the best out of them.'

'He's good at positioning people. I can see where the ball will go in this match.'

Taichi covered his ears with both hands so that he wouldn't have to hear the third-years' conversation. The match was a 0-2 loss for the white team.

'Now, I will present the results of the selection test.'

The physical course supervisor spoke once Taichi and the other four lined up.

'Hirai Harutaka's participation in the alternate team for the physical course soccer club has been acknowledged. That's all.'

Hirai's smile slipped in his shock. The three people besides Taichi who weren't chosen started applauding, not surprised by the events. Taichi also started clapping perfunctorily a moment later.

'Thank you very much, everyone. I'm really happy,' said Hirai politely. Coach Ono and the third-year

students went up to praise him, patting Hirai on the back, hugging his shoulder and calling out to him.

(Even though I should've been chosen... Why? Why did this happen?)

Hirai noticed Taichi looking down.

'Mashima-kuuun, it's too bad, since you tried so hard. If it weren't for that injury... Let's ask if they'll have another selection test. I want to play together with Mashima-kun – '

'Shut up! Stop. Like I'd take the selection test again!'

Taichi fled from the scene.

2 – hito mo oshi (people seem dear)

-

During Golden Week, all the Kaimeisei Middle School students had a nine-day-long study camp. They had been going to an old hotel on the Bousou Peninsula since a few years ago, with proper staff for cleaning and meals.

The first years were split into two-people rooms by their classroom number, so Taichi and Hirai shared a room.

Ever since the soccer selection test, Taichi had been avoiding Hirai. He didn't feel like congratulating him – rather, he'd probably say hateful things if he said anything at all. Just seeing Hirai with his bed head in the seat in front of him was enough to make Taichi feel fed up.

(Mum scolded me for ages about failing the selection, so I have to beat him in the test scores this time. I won't allow myself to keep losing to a guy like that.)

Hirai was the same as always though, speaking in his usual lazy tone to Taichi about pointless things. Taichi didn't know what to say that wouldn't end up in him saying something angry, so he had been ignoring him and avoiding him this whole time. However, he wouldn't be able to do that if they were staying in the same room for nine days.

After getting to the camp and their room, Taichi spread out his question books and reference books on the table by the wall. Then, Hirai spoke to him with a smile.

'Mashima-kun, let's both do our best. I toss and turn in my sleep, so could I have the bottom bunk?'

There was a bunk bed in the room that was originally a single, so that they could use it for two people. The room wasn't that large.

Taichi looked away, finding it hard to breathe. That made Hirai come up to him. His innocent smile made Taichi suddenly think of a girl.

(No, no, no! Chihaya isn't this annoying. She's straightforward, frank and honest with herself, and is

never two-faced... When we're together, she always looks really happy and calls out my name.)

'Hirai... why do you look so happy?'

'I said that we got along well, right?'

'When we were two. This is stupid.'

'But I remember the things that make me really happy. I didn't really make many friends like that afterwards.'

'It'd be weirder to have serious problems when you were two years old. If you don't like something then, you can just cry.'

Since Taichi had a sister under seven, Taichi knew a lot about how young children couldn't take any responsibility. No matter what the reason, if his sister cried, his mother always scolded him, the 'big brother'. 'But Rika – ' Taichi had said that, but then his mother forbade the word 'but'.

'It's your own fault that you don't have friends. I'm going to study until the start of the review, so could you be quiet?' said Taichi bluntly. Then, he sat at his desk and spread out a reference book. Hirai plopped himself down on the bed and took out a thick book. It looked like it wasn't a reference book. On the front cover, the words "Research Essay Collection on Heian Literature" were written in gold. Taichi spoke up without thinking.

'... What's that book?'

'It's interesting! Since Ise Monogatari was so interesting, I borrowed this research book from my grandfather.'

'Ise... The one with Narihira, the author of "Chihayaburu"...?'

Taichi snatched the book from Hirai and flipped through the pages... but Taichi threw it back without ten seconds.

'I can't read this – it's full of old kanji and has old writing like on karuta – like the one that's read "koiuchou" but written as "kohisutefu".'

'Yeah, since it has essays from Showa 10. The kanji are the old ones.'

'Why are you reading that? Wait – you can understand enough of it to say it's interesting?'

'I talked with Fujiwara-sensei about it, and he says my reading's correct.' There's some research that says Ise Monogatari was split into three and had different authors, and the evidence for that is...'

'Asking was pointless. There's no exam in liberal arts.'

Taichi made a sign with his hands to say he was done with the conversation and went back to his reference book. He had determined that Hirai was a madman of the highest level.

Hirai didn't seriously study after that either. In the large room with a chandelier and red carpet that appeared to be a party hall, desks and chairs were laid out. Hirai took the classes there properly and handed in the homework and read the notes that were required.

However, he didn't do anything beyond that. He didn't even review on his own. He hadn't brought his own question books or reference books either. Just his textbooks.

While Taichi studied in all his free time, not wanting to waste any of it, Hirai just read his thick books. It wasn't just Heian literature – he read books filled with formulae that looked to be on physics.

'... Hirai, what's so interesting about that book?'

'I get to know about things I don't know. Mashima-kun, don't you ever think that knowing the unknown would be interesting?'

'It doesn't have anything to do with proficiency tests... How can you have the time for that?'

'This is normal for me though?... I know I'm not normal. Mashima-kun, you study for your tests. I know that's normal – I know it's right. Everyone is like that...'

Hirai shut the book and held it to his chest in a lonely manner. Taichi made a click with his tongue. Seeing Taichi look like an abandoned cat made Taichi feel guilty.

'... I don't need this time. I'll be like everyone else...'

'Don't screw with me!' yelled Taichi, which made Hirai curl up more.

'Listen, Hirai. The guy on top shouldn't complain. It's uncool.'

Taichi pointed his thumb down scornfully.

Hirai let out a quiet groan.

'I'll correct that. You can just be your hateful carefree self. You can be so hateful that I'd want to say "Ha, serves you right!" when I beat you in a test. I'd never be able to look up again if I lost to a crybaby weakling.'

Taichi turned away from Hirai. Why did he want to deal with a guy as strange as him? He probably just wanted to say a couple of things.

'... Hirai. I definitely won't lose to somebody like you... I really, really, really hate you.'

-

After Taichi pretended to be asleep when a teacher came around to check that the lights were off, he got up. He checked that Hirai on the lower bunk was sleeping and then went towards the desk quietly with a torch. He was going to start studying again.

– Before he'd noticed, it had already become brighter outside. The torch was on the floor.

'Shoot.'

Taichi got up, which made the blanket fall from his shoulders. Somebody had put it there after he fell asleep.

'This... Hirai?'

There was nobody else. Hirai was sleeping without a blanket. Taichi put the blanket back on him. Hirai was murmuring something, so Taichi put his ear close without thinking –

'Why don't you understand... It's interesting if you think about it... Hating it without thinking about it is... The Fibonacci sequence has a harmony with the numbers that come before... Why? I'm not strange... I'm not... strange...'

'What, sleep talk? That's too long. Saying you're not strange is strange in itself.'

(It's strange, but you can like what you want. I kind of understand his loneliness. Somebody could be first place in karuta in elementary school and still have no friends... I wouldn't have bothered to find out more about Arata if Chihaya hadn't talked to him either.)

Taichi remembered how Arata's eyes had sparkled when he said, 'Let's play karuta.' That wasn't happiness that came only from being able to play karuta – he had been happy because he had found friends.

(I bullied him because he was a dark and strange guy without trying to get to know him. I didn't notice that he had come here leaving his karuta friends behind. It's because Chihaya was there that...)

'I... guess, in the end... I'm friends with... Hirai, too...'

-

The day after the nine-day camp, Taichi went to school for the proficiency test for five courses. The results –

1. *Class 5 – Hirai Harutaka – 500 points*
2. *Class 5 – Mashima Taichi – 498 points*

(I lost...! I lost even though I tried so hard!? Even though I studied when he was sleeping too.)

Rather than frustration, Taichi was stunned by how illogical it was. He felt like his head was numb.

'This... like I'd accept this! That guy doesn't study at all compared to me – '

'Mashima-kun, you really tried hard this time!'

The moment Taichi heard Hirai's carefree voice, he grabbed Hirai by the collar and thrust him away.

'I don't want your sympathy! Like you can understand how I feel!'

Taichi had nowhere to run. As long as Hirai was in this school, Taichi had no place where he could say, 'I can win in this. I can be first.'

(That guy's not my friend. Not at all. We're definitely not friends!)

Taichi wanted to hit himself for being such a fool, thinking even for just a moment that they might be friends.

After school, Taichi skipped club and cram school. Before he'd noticed, his feet had brought him to the practice hall for the Shiranami Society.

Municipal middle schools would still have club now. Chihaya, who was in the go-home club, would definitely be here, so Taichi hoped as he went through the door to the municipal culture centre.

(I'll enjoy myself by teasing Chihaya. Her responses are so straightforward – it's really interesting.)

However –

'Oh, how unexpected. It's Matsuge... Taichi-kun. You're the first to arrive!'

The woman at the reception was surprised.

'Where's Chihaya?'

'She said she was taking a break today. Her older sister's in show business, right? Her sister got a big job, so she's having a meal with her family and people from the company to celebrate. In Roppongi – amazing, isn't it?'

'Hm...'

How boring. Waiting in an empty room like this by himself was so boring it put Taichi in a bad mood.

(Chihaya must've waited like this by herself too... None of the adults are here yet at this time. Hyoro's school is far too, and the elementary school kids only come sometimes.)

Taichi opened his homework, with nothing else to do. Soon... the adults started to gather and Harada-sensei came.

'Oh, Matsuge-kun, welcome. You'll be participating at D-kyuu in the Saitama C/D/E-kyuu competition this weekend that you applied for, right? Chihaya-chan'll be in D-kyuu too.'

'Chihaya's D-kyuu now?'

'Yeah, she finished second during the E-kyuu competition before Golden Week. She said she was going to give it her all to participate in the same competition you were. I'll lead since the others seem busy, but you're fine with me, right?'

'Yes, thank you very much.'

'Chihaya-chan's really been practising. You can't lose, Matsuge-kun. I'll give you special training today.'

'I can't beat you, Sensei,' said Taichi sullenly, wanting at least to win in karuta to clear his head.

Harada-sensei laughed. 'Did something happen? It's fine – even if something happens to you outside of karuta, you can use that to face karuta and become stronger. That's something I envy in you youngsters.'

'I wonder about that.'

Harada-sensei sat in front of Taichi and looked at him with kind eyes.

'You've become stronger, Matsuge-kun. Today, my handicap for you is four cards.'

That day, Taichi had three practice matches with Harada-sensei.

'Matsuge-kun, how's it feel? Changing the handicap from ten cards to four cards didn't change the results, right? You became stronger because you lost. Don't think about anything unnecessary and just go at the cards – that's the power of concentration.'

'I've only been studying though... I just did image training.'

'Hahaha, that's fine. Though there are a number of details I want to comment on. For example, when there are fewer cards left and there are many remaining in the opponent's bottom-left row, be sure to move your hand closer to the cards rather than leaving it in its usual position. You don't need to keep your hand at its regular position all the time. You want to move your hand as straightly as possible. Hopefully you'll be able to start thinking about those kinds of strategies soon, as you play.'

'Yes,' replied Taichi, reviewing the movement of his hand.

'That said, don't lose yourself in your strategies. Since you're good at thinking, you think too much, and you're too good at remembering. You have to remember to "forget".'

'Remember... to forget?'

Sensei replied with a deep nod.

* * *

Three days afterwards, there was the C/D/E-kyuu competition in Saitama. Harada-sensei took Taichi, Chihaya and the C-kyuu society members to the hall. The competition was being managed by another karuta society and was being held in a public building with many large Japanese rooms, like the one where the Shiranami Society practised. The competition was held once a year in various parts of Japan.

'I'm in the same competition as Taichi! We really are! Harada-sensei wasn't lying!'

Chihaya had been in high spirits ever since getting on the train.

'Hey, hey, Taichi – I'm going to get the ooyamafuda today, OK? Especially "wata no hara ya"! Since the sounds "ha", "ra", and "ya", all have the vowel "a", it's harder to hear than "wata no hara ko". I practised kakoite too – '

'If it's hard to hear, it's "ya", right? If it's easy to hear the reader's breathing, it's either that or "ko", so decide there. And calm down a bit. The train is public transportation. Ah, you're so noisy.'

Taichi had convinced his mother – who had said, 'If you hadn't made a mistake, you could have had full marks too,' instead of praising him for being second on the test – to let him leave the house, but it had taken him much effort. He was exhausted. He didn't feel like competing. If he wasn't first in today's competition, he probably wouldn't be able to go home. He hadn't even had the energy to choose what to wear, so he was in his soccer jersey from school.

'Ah, right, Taichi – you're so smart! But "asaborake ya" and "asaborake u" are – '

'Don't wait for the full six syllables once some cards are read. Kimariji keep changing – the same card won't be read twice. Remember all the cards that've been read during the match.'

'But... That's impossible. My heart's pounding just from thinking about what'll be read next for half of the match – it takes all of me to focus on the cards that are going to be read, and the cards are still all lined up... Though I can tell once there are fewer cards left.'

'You'll lose if you wait until then. Use your head to think more.'

Chihaya looked to be deep in thought about that, which made Harada-sensei laugh.

'Chihaya-chan, just take the cards faster than your opponent. Rather than thinking about it, hear the words quickly and move your hand quickly.'

'Sensei, that's completely different from what you told me.'

'People have different skills. First, master your own skills and be confident in them.'

-

Chihaya won without playing in the first match and Taichi won with a seven-card difference. They both won the second and third matches and soon, their mouths both gaped in surprise when they reached the quarterfinal match.

'I'm going to play with Taichi!'

'My opponent's Chihaya!?'

Though they had played countless matches during practice, Taichi had never thought that they would meet in a competition, where they would have been eliminated at any loss. They were both still shaken as the match began.

They had fifteen minutes to line up their cards and remember their positions. Taichi tried to put aside the thought that his opponent was Chihaya. He knew that he would go easy on her or end up feeling

like losing otherwise.

(No matter who the opponent, all I have to do is take the cards! Rather than memorizing the positions of all the cards in order, I'll imaging where I'll reach out to when each poem is read –)

'I look forward to playing with you.'

They each had twenty-five cards, sitting between cards beside them in three rows. They bowed and the opening poem was read.

<naniwazu ni
sakuya kono hana
fuyu gomori
ima wo harube to
sakuya kono hana
ima wo harube to
sakuya kono hana>

(In Naniwa Bay,
now the flowers are blossoming.
After lying dormant all winter,
now the spring has come
and the flowers are blossoming.
Now the spring has come
and the flowers are blossoming.)

Tension was high on the tatami mats.

<arashi>

The moment just as the sound 'shi' could be heard, there was a light clapping sound, and a card flew. Chihaya retrieved the taken card which had 'tatsuta no kawa no nishiki nari keri' written on it in hiragana from a corner of the room.

'Yay!'

'Tsk. We're just getting started.'

Taichi just couldn't win against Chihaya sometimes when differentiating between consonants. Though he felt like they had touched the card at the same time, just the slightest difference had given the card to Chihaya.

(Chihaya's a slow starter. She can't remember all the positions of the cards. Her strategy is simple too – she just lines them up in the easiest way for her to take them. That makes it easy for me to take them too. Chihaya's just quick with her good hearing.)

After that, with about half his cards left, Taichi was overwhelmingly putting the pressure on Chihaya.

(Ah, I'm easily in the lead... The tension from a real match keeps my concentration up. Maybe

because I've experienced the same thing during cram school tests and sports matches. Chihaya's heart must be beating wildly. Her face is bright red.)

In the second half of the match, Chihaya finally managed to get the same amount of cards that Taichi had, but Taichi had one left with a ten-card difference because of his head start.

Taichi took a few deep breaths to clear his head while the previous card's poem was being read until the end. When he worked himself up, he sometimes missed the reader's breathing, so he cleared his head to nothingness and let his ears... his whole body drown in the reader's voice.

<kaze>

(Which is it? 'kaze so' or 'kaze wo' – they're both in Chihaya's row, split between left and right –)

<wo>

It wasn't the 's' consonant which Chihaya was so good at hearing. Taichi swept away the 'kudakete mono wo omou koro kana' card from his opponent's middle left row without any hesitation.

'Thank you very much.'

After the quarterfinal match ended, Harada-sensei came up to the two of them from where he had been watching.

'Matsuge-kun's win then? Chihaya-chan, maybe you should have thought more about strategy.'

'I'm not that weak, Sensei!'

'You always lose to me though.'

Taichi gathered the cards and put them back in the box, ignoring Chihaya who was sticking out her tongue. On the very top of the cards was the one he'd taken last, 'kaze wo'. Harada-sensei looked in.

'If it had been "kaze so", the game probably wouldn't have ended here. Chihaya-chan would've got it. She's good with that consonant and it was on her dominant side.'

'“kaze wo kudake” and “kaze so miso” – with “so miso”, the sounds string together like do-re-mi so they're easy to remember,' murmured Taichi. He memorized kimariji by the sounds, but Chihaya wrote them on paper and put them up all around her room.

'The “kaze wo kudake” card has this poem:

“kaze wo itami
iwa utsu nami no
onore nomi
kudakete mono wo
omou koro kana”

(Waves that beat against the rocks,

fanned by a fierce wind –
it is I alone
who breaks, those times
when I think of her!)

The wind is so strong that the waves are beating against the rocks and breaking them – like that, the speaker alone is troubled. Even though the speaker is thinking about someone else, that someone feels nothing. That's the meaning of the poem. A card to remember for going against the wind and crying out, "Only me!"

'That feels kind of like a sports manga... I thought it was something like "I caught a cold so I'll fix it with a shot", so maybe I couldn't remember it because it sounded painful to me.'

'Ahahaha, that's a doctor's kid for you. That's a good way of remembering it too.'

Only Taichi was listening to Harada-sensei's explanation. At some point, Chihaya had curled up and fallen asleep right there.

'... It looks like Chihaya-chan's used up all her energy. How about you, Matsuge-kun?'

'I'm still fine.'

Taichi won the next match and would advance to the final. He had guaranteed advancing to C-kyuu as well. Of course he was tired. However, it would be too frustrating to go home here without taking first, so he persevered and was victorious with a two-card difference.

* * *

It was halfway through May. At Kaimeisei Middle School, clubs were put on hold a week before midterms so that students could study for tests. Before then, the university course soccer club had one match. Their opponents were the local middle school.

'While "building the body", you "build friends" – that's the goal of this club. Just practicing and playing futsal within the club isn't enough to make you feel that.'

After saying that, Coach Ono, he announced the members who would go. Taichi was the only first year who was chosen for the team. He was a forward, just as he'd hoped.

(Yes, I can tell Mum that I'm the only first year. She'll probably just tell me to win though.)

Ever since the win at the karuta competition, Taichi's heart had been feeling lighter and lighter.

-

They borrowed the physical course's pitch to practise for their soccer match. While Taichi and the others warmed up, Taichi noticed Hirai standing by the goal post in a short-sleeved jersey. The moment Hirai spotted Taichi, he waved.

'Mashima-kuuun, I'm cheering for you!'

Taichi, unsure of what to reply, looked to the ground. Ever since Taichi thrust Hirai away, he hadn't had a proper conversation with him, which meant of course that he hadn't apologised either.

Hirai was in the alternate team for the physical course soccer club – it seemed he was doing his best in the troops. They only had one day's break, right before the midterms. Taichi had decided to study while Hirai couldn't take a break from his club. Taichi had taken a break from cram school as well – he had nothing on his mind except how to prepare for his exams, with methods such as summarizing his own notes.

(Next time, I'll definitely be first on the tests. It's not a match I can't win – even he can't keep getting full marks forever.)

Even if Taichi didn't listen to Hirai, he always had him in the corner of his eye. He'd noticed that Hirai didn't talk much lately and often seemed to be in a daze.

There was something off with how Hirai was being different from normal, but Taichi also felt it was great that Hirai wasn't as noisy. Taichi also felt like he should leave Hirai alone if he was feeling tired.

'Do your best, Mashima-kuuun!'

Coach Ono replied for Taichi.

'Yeah, thanks for the encouragement.'

Then, Coach put a hand on Taichi's shoulder.

'You lost to Hirai. He kept coming to bow his head to me, telling me to let Mashima be in am atch too... Saying that you would've been able to do better if you hadn't been injured in the selection test.'

'Am I... only in this match because Hirai asked?'

'That's not it. You're definitely more than fit for this team. Just keep in mind that Hirai came to ask. He's a good friend, right?'

(Why's that guy asking things like that for me... I didn't beat him in the last test and I lost in the selection too – is this him pitying me?)

Taichi ran up to Hirai.

'Oi. I don't want your sympathy.'

'... Eh? I just want to see you handle the ball, Mashima-kun. Is that no good? I can't see it often since we practise in different places for club.'

A gentle smile that didn't seem to have any hidden meanings to it at all – since Hirai looked so happy, all Taichi could do was silently turn away.

(If you want to see it so badly, I'll show you.)

– Fortunately, Taichi’s team members relied on him. It seemed that the way this team thought of ‘friends’ was that whether or not they actually liked the guy, they would use him to win.

‘Mashima-kun, *look out for your back! Never mind and be careful!*’ cheered Hirai in English. It wasn’t just Hirai. All the instructions during practice and the matches were in English. It seemed it was because there was no point in studying English if you couldn’t use it when you needed to. The first years had started following that rule the week after the selection test since they had become used to the club by then.

At first, Taichi had been stuck – his mouth always moved to speak in English. However, after becoming used to it, he could now speak lightly even in English without any hesitation. They were having this match in English too, at their usual pace.

However, the local middle school team liked displeased.

‘Tsk, that’s just bullying from the smart cards.’

‘That’s cowardly – we can’t tell what they’re saying at all..’

‘What do you think this is – the world cup? They’re getting ahead of themselves, like idiots.’

In the end, Taichi’s goal and one assist goal gave them a win, 2-1. However, the opposing team looked sullen and didn’t even greet them properly at the end.

‘Cowards! Cowards! English-using cowards!’

When they were leaving, one of the opposing team started mocking them and then they all joined in.

‘Come on – stop it! I’ll request for Japanese next time,’ scolded the opposing team’s coach. Then, they left.

The upper-years on Taichi’s team burst into laughter.

‘Losing their nerve because they’re stupid – that’s just sad. It’s their own fault!’

‘Yeah, yeah – it’s their problem.’

For some reason, Taichi was angered by those words. It was true that the opposing team’s attitude had been childish... but making fun of that would make them the same.

‘Mashima-kun, you were amazing. I want to make a goal like that too!’ When Taichi saw Hirai come up to him with shining eyes, he ended up saying something cold.

‘Like you can’t. You’re in the physical course, aren’t you?’

That put Hirai at a loss for words.

(I’m... the same as those guys who said we were cowards for using English, aren’t I. I have an inferiority complex.)

'Mm... It's true that I'm envious. I still... have something I want to do on the field. Right now, I'm just doing goalie practice. Since they want to make use of my height.'

(He's not in the field? He showed his ability as a leader and his skills during the selection test – wasn't that why he was chosen? He's a goalie?)

'... You definitely have the skill to be a goalie too.'

After saying it, Taichi bit his lip. His words weren't much consolation.

'That's true. Thanks! If they're telling me to do it, I must be OK at it. Better than I think I am, anyway. I feel better after hearing that from you, Mashima-kun!'

Taichi hated himself as he saw Hirai smiling at him. Taichi still hadn't apologised for thrusting him away, but he now noticed that he'd already been forgiven.

(Even when I said something awful, Hirai didn't say anything. He didn't blame me either. Hirai's a guy who doesn't say any "but"s, like me. Probably something he decided himself – unlike me, who stopped saying it on Mum's orders.)

Hirai's back looked large as he ran off. Like that of an adult.

(Eh, why this all of a sudden...)

That feeling pierced Taichi's chest.



3 – onore nomi (it is I alone)

Hirai's back, which had looked so large, made Taichi's chest hurt. Taichi was troubled for several days about why the pain did not disappear and why he couldn't look straight at Hirai.

At times like this – when he didn't understand his relationships with other people – there were words that Taichi used to guide himself.

'The source of the problem and the responsibility for it is never one hundred percent the other party.'

Taichi's father had taught him that. His father was also somebody who was strict with himself – he liked the phrase 'self-improvement'.

(I'm at fault for not being able to respond to Hirai properly. Hirai's an airhead, so I should just take what he says at face value.)

Taichi relaxed after discovering what had been wrong with himself. He could improve himself more.

(I need to tell Hirai thank you. The words 'thank you' have a lot of value to them, so I'll get something back. If somebody says thank you to you, you have to say thank you for the words that made you happy – giving back, as Dad used to say.)

Taichi looked for Hirai and found him practicing by himself alone against the concrete wall behind the physical course clubrooms. He threw and kicked the ball to the wall and caught it when it returned.

Behind him, there was a fence that was painted white, probably as a stand in for a goal. It was a thin fence that you might accidentally overlook and walk right into if you weren't careful.

Today, all the physical course members were supposed to have gone to the special facility for the affiliated university in the city. The only person by these clubrooms was Hirai.

Hirai's forehead was sweaty as he chased the ball fervently. He was so focussed that he didn't even notice when Taichi called his name.

(He could skip if he wanted to since nobody's looking, but... He's so stupidly honest.)

For some reason, Taichi felt a bit awkward. He glanced to his side and saw Hirai's bag and a notebook with sticky notes all over it on the concrete stairs. It looked like the clubrooms were locked.

The wind blew open the notebook, flipping the pages. Hirai's writing was squeezed tightly onto them. They were crammed in there, unlike Hirai's neatly summarized class notes.

Written in the notebook were various practice menus, how much he'd done and his tips, and the parts that he wasn't able to do yet.

'Drop your waist more.' 'Weight towards your thumb, not your ankle.' 'Side-jump then catch, roll your upper half, stop the force of the ball, drop to the ground in receiving position. Hold the ball tight to your chest – don't forget.' 'For high shots, jump with the closer leg – lift up the opposite leg and arm. Be careful not to jump with your right leg so that you can get better with your left!'

Every page was filled with so many words that it looked black.

(So even Hirai writes things to remember... He usually remembers with his body, but he writes this much too.)

After writing it to help him remember, he used his body to practice.

(He understands what it means to work hard too.)

The latter half of the notebook was a journal. He had the contents of each day's practice written in detail there, noting down in red pen the people he'd seen.

There were no lies in this journal. Taichi was sure of it. Even though Hirai didn't see anyone today, he would probably write down what he'd practised – not for anyone else. Just for himself.

Taichi shut the notebook and let out a long sigh. He waited until Hirai's practice ended... or he would have, if Hirai hadn't noticed him partway through.

'Ah, Mashima-kuuun, what's up?'

'I'm just here 'cause I had some free time.'

It was probably obvious to Hirai that there was no way Taichi had any free time. Hirai cocked his head and then looked down, thinking. Then, he smiled.

'Then would you join me in practising? I want to imagine the opponent's shots and do cross practice. You're still in your uniform, so it's OK, right?'

'Yeah.'

– Today's 'giving back'.

The two of them practised until the sun set. They also walked back on the way home to the nearest station. They talked about pointless things and both ended up smiling – it really was fun.

-

The next day, there was a lecture on classic literature. It was the hottest day so far this year. Since they were in the period of uniform change when taking off their jackets was allowed, the students were all in their dress shirts with their ties loose. There were many students who had rolled up their sleeves.

'Today, we will analyse the "Journey to the East" episode of Ise Monogatari. This is a particularly famous scene even within Ise Monogatari.'

At the lectern in the third lecture room, Fujiwara-sensei spoke in a sonorous voice.

'“In the past, there was a man. This man was convinced that his existence was meaningless and that he was not needed by anyone. He did not want to be in the city any longer, so he left on a journey to find a place to live in the east.” This man is Ariwara Narihira. Searching for himself, escaping from reality, running away from human relationships because of his own thoughts – '

Taichi was given a start at the words 'convinced that his existence was meaningless'. Harada-sensei's words suddenly echoed again in his ears.

– '“It is I alone”. Even though the speaker is thinking about someone else, that someone feels nothing. That's the meaning of the poem. A card to remember for going against the wind and crying out, “Only me!”'

Taichi glanced at Hirai beside him. He was taking notes in one notebook while also studying English in the notebook underneath it.

(It's unusual for Hirai not to be paying attention in the lecture. Did he forget his homework?)

Taichi gave into his curiosity and peeked at what Hirai was studying.

(Eh... That has to be second or third-year level.)

On top of that, Taichi could see a bruise through the gap left by the cuff in Hirai's sleeve. It had been unbuttoned in the heat.

(Did he hit something? I don't think it was yesterday... Yeah, I don't remember seeing it. This morning, maybe?)

After the lecture finished, it was lunch break. When Taichi stood up, he didn't miss how the English notebook that Hirai quickly shut away had somebody else's name on it. He also didn't miss that it was the name of a third-year student in the physical course.

'What are you doing, Hirai? Whose is that?'

Taichi took a challenging tone without thinking.

'E-er, an upperclassman asked me to help with his homework... since he had his hands full with the match yesterday.'

'And that bruise on your arm?'

Taichi suddenly imagined an upperclassman grabbing Hirai's arm and forcing him to do his homework.

'This? Ah, I just run into a lot of things. Nobody did this to me.'

(Would you normally go out of your way to say 'Nobody did this to me'?)

'There wasn't a bruise a yesterday. Did you practise this morning?'

Hirai nodded without hesitation.

'Even if that's where the bruise is from... why are you doing somebody else's homework? It's strange.'

'Ehh? Is it really that strange?'

To Taichi, it looked like Hirai was playing dumb.

'Give it to me.'

Taichi snatched the homework notebook.

'I-it's fine. It's got nothing to do with you!'

'Let's go to the library. It's quiet. We'll eat later. If you have any other ones, be honest and take them out.'

'Mashima-kun... why...'

Hirai looked troubled. Neither of them wanted to be pitied, Taichi realised.

'What, you're not going to say "Thanks!" and smile like always?'

'Urgh... sorry, thanks...'

'You don't have to say thanks. Just leave it at "Why"!'

With fuzzy feelings, Taichi started to do the homework of a complete stranger.

* * *

From the next day on, with the midterms approaching, the university course clubs entered their pre-exam break. Perhaps because of the coming rainy season, a light rain was coming down on the newly sprouted plants. The rain hitting the fresh leaves continued to grow stronger.

Taichi, who was studying in the library, was told by the librarian that it was closing time.

He decided to go home quickly to finish the rest of his review problems and took the shortcut to the school gates through the sports ground even though his shoes might get dirty.

'Eh? ... What's that guy doing?'

Hirai was cleaning up the grounds in the rain. He had two buckets, picking up small rocks from the ground in one and filling up puddles with the dirt in the other.

'You're soaked. Why are you doing this on a rainy day?'

Taichi had heard that the physical course clubs only had a day off right before exams. As long as university course students were in a physical course club, they weren't exempt.

'I feel cold just watching you. Just get it over with.'

When Hirai looked away, Taichi understood. There were a number of buckets under the roof of the tool shed. Taichi walked up in them and peeked inside – they were filled with rocks. Beside them, there were more empty buckets in a pile. When Taichi opened the tool shed door, there were buckets filled with dirt.

'... Can you not leave until you've filled all the empty buckets with rocks?'

Even if the sun did set late in May, there was no way that somebody could finish this alone before night.

'Are you an idiot? ... You, and the people who made you do it.'

Hirai had been doing somebody else's homework. This was probably an unreasonable order by an upperclassman.

Hirai silently continued his work.

'You accepted it, so deal with it somehow. You'll get a cold.'

Forgetting about other people's homework for now, Taichi didn't want to get a cold from the rain. If he got a fever now, he wouldn't be able to study for the tests.

'Even you might make a mistake on the tests if you caught a cold.'

Raindrops dripped from Hirai's hair down his cheeks. His jersey was soaked too, sticking to his slender body.

'Screw up, screw up. Catch a cold and screw up.'

Taichi looked away from Hirai and tried to leave. His heart was pounding. He tripped on a bucket of small rocks.

'Ah.'

When Taichi tried to put the bucket back in its place, it was heavier than he expected.

'This is heavy... Even though this doesn't have anything to do with me, it's pretty awful.'

As Taichi tried to leave, his heart started pounding more loudly. He had done something similar before. Because he'd thought he couldn't win... he had done something awful.

– 'Mashima, you're a coward.'

Arata's voice... Taichi could hear it clearly.

(I'm still as uncool as I was before. Just as uncool and disgraceful as when I stole Arata's glasses before the match even though he can't see anything without them, since I knew I couldn't beat him in karuta... I haven't changed at all.)

'Doing that... doesn't count as a win.'

If Taichi left now, he would be as awful as the upperclassmen from the physical course.

Taichi took off the top half of his uniform as well as his tie. After putting them along with his bag in the tool shed, he put down the bucket, kicked his way through some puddles and ran towards Hirai.

'Hey, Hirai. I'll help so let's get this over with quickly. You'll catch a cold.'

'Mashima-kun... It's fine. It's my job.'

'You get stuck doing these things 'cause you just do them without saying anything. The physical course guys do some awful things.'

'Physical course and university course – that's got nothing to do with it. It's because I'm the newbie.'

Unexpectedly, Hirai was smiling.

'I'm happy that I'm not being treated differently. Nobody puts me at a distance. They're really strict with me during practice when I can't do something too.'

'Are you a masochist? It's just because you could do anything up until now even without anyone being strict with you – you're just happy 'cause it's rare for you to be told off. You really are a strange guy.'

'Yup, this is better than being ignored. Better than being left outside of the circle. Much better than running away without actually competing.'

Taichi looked down, pretending to pick up stones as he hid his face. His chest stung.

(I can't run. With Hirai... it's not winning or losing. I can't run.)

'Mashima-kuuun... thanks. Really. Don't overdo it!)

'If you have the time to talk, hurry up and get this done.'

'OK!'

-

The next day, when Taichi went through the school gates in the morning, he saw physical course students in a crowd at the front, making a front. When Taichi tried to walk past them, just thinking they were in the way, he heard their conversation.

'Cleaning up the ground now?'

'The first-year in the soccer club that came in from the university course – '

A chill ran down Taichi's spine and he listened in carefully.

'He didn't have to do it in the rain.'

(Yesterday... was that bad?)

'Right now, he's explaining himself to the other guys in the soccer club.'

The bruise on Hirai's wrist flashed through Taichi's mind. Maybe he was being blamed because Taichi had gone and helped him.

(This is bad for Hirai.)

People that looked like members of the physical course soccer club were surrounding somebody on the pitch that Taichi had worked on yesterday. The black head he saw in the middle...

'Hirai!'

(Hirai tried so hard – what problem do you have with him!?)

Taichi forced his way through the crowd to stand beside Hirai.

'... Mashima-kun!?'

In a low, intimidating voice, Taichi said, 'You still want to make Hirai do more? I think giving somebody ridiculous orders without letting them say anything is a human rights problem.'

'Mashima... is this the guy?'

The large-framed upperclassmen nodded at each other and then looked exasperated.

'Mashima, what are you saying? Did Hirai ask you to help? Was he crying about how troubled he was?'

'Th... that's...'

It was true that Hirai had only said things like 'It's fine – it's got nothing to do with you' and 'It's my job'.

'I just thought he was holding back because he didn't want to trouble me...'

'And you just meddled without listening to Hirai. Hirai's been advancing – trying his best to get along with the club.'

Taichi couldn't object.

'Nobody's forcing him to do anything. The only reason he didn't stop in the rain was his own will.'

Hirai, who had been astonished, came back to his senses and tried to stop Taichi, but Taichi held him back.

'Then what about that bruise on his arm...'

The upperclassmen looked at each other, confused, and then they nodded in comprehension.

'Oh, the one from when he hit the frame used for the goal post after catching the ball? We told him to take a break and ice it, but he practices hard even from the morning.'

(Frame... Come to think of it, there was something like that.)

While Taichi was thinking, an upperclassman said, 'Got it?' Then, they tried to leave.

'Wait. You really – '

'Mashima-kun, wait – you've misunderstood. the upperclassmen are going to help me do what we didn't finish yesterday.'

'... Eh?'

Taichi turned to look at where Hirai was pointing and saw the club members coming out of the tool shed with buckets.

'When they came in the morning, they thought it was strange 'cause more holes than they'd expected had been filled up and the buckets were also filled with rocks, even though it was raining, so I explained the situation to them and then...'

'What, you aren't being bullied or something?'

'I'm not! Though everyone said you were meddlesome just now, that was praise. They admired you. Otherwise, the captain wouldn't've said that they were all going to do the rest this morning.'

'Then what about the homework and the bruise...'

'For the homework, I was just looking over one of the upperclassmen's notebooks since the notes were a mess – he'd taken a nap since he was so tired. I was so happy when they asked me for help. For the homework, I just took it because I heard one of them say that he'd rather sleep than do it. I thought that if I wrote how to do the problems then it could be a good reference for them.'

'You wouldn't normally take up someone's homework... And what, you were happy to be relied on?'

'Yup!'

Hirai's innocent smile made Taichi feel exhausted. He crouched down, even though the wet ground would make his trousers dirt.

'Are you serious...'

Just as the club members said, it appeared that the bruise had also come from practice.

'Then say it more clearly! I was worried!'

'Sooorry. I was so happy, so I just ended up letting you keep going.'

Hirai ran a hand through his hair in an embarrassed manner, making his bed head even worse.

'Sorry to make you misunderstand, Mashima-kuuun.'

'... Ah... hahaha... hahahahahaha!'

All Taichi could do in the face of Hirai's kindness was laugh. He almost fell over in laughter when he thought about his own stupid kindness.

'Hey, Mashima-kun, I'm really really happy that you came here for me – I'm sorry I made you misunderstand, but I'm seriously grateful! Thanks for misunderstanding.'

Taichi stood up and hugged Hirai's shoulder. He was still laughing. Hirai started laughing as well.

-

Then... Hirai beat Taichi again with a one-point difference during the midterms. Just as Taichi had let out a sigh, looking at the posted results, Hirai patted him on the shoulder.

'When I tried my hardest, I feel like I've come to understand a bit... Because I'm in a club, I don't have as much time to look over my notes. I'm sleepy since I'm so tired, so it's hard for me to concentrate.'

Hirai laughed, sounding embarrassed.

'I feel like I understand what everyone's "hard work" a little bit better... Though maybe I don't understand it, I've had a taste of it. I've got to try harder.'

Taichi used his fist to jab Hirai's side.

'I seriously hate you...'

Hirai looked at Taichi with a troubled expression.

'I really love you though!'

The students surrounding them stopped to look at them, so Taichi ran off.

-

After Taichi returned home and was scolded by his mother – 'Second place again?' – he wrote the word 'Focus' with big strokes on a piece of paper in his room.

'It's impossible to chase perfection in everything. If I have to become first place... I'll just focus on getting past Hirai.'

If Taichi took a break from karuta, he wouldn't be able to meet Chihaya. His promise with Arata also... but Hirai was too large in front of Taichi. He couldn't advance while avoiding Hirai.

Taichi thought about putting up the piece of paper, but he decided not to and shut it in his drawer. He felt like he would feel satisfied just from looking at the word if he put it up.

* * *

It was July. According to the weather forecast, it would soon be the end of the rainy season, but the rain was incredibly heavy at this time.

On the train that Taichi took to school in the morning, he saw the news flash by on the screen above the door: 'Rainy season causes heavy rain in Fukui, Kyoto and Hyogo.'

'Rainy in Fukui... Hope nothing bad happens.'

Taichi was startled when he suddenly heard a familiar way of speaking. He looked for the speaker without thinking. It was a young man's voice... but not Arata. The man was probably also from Fukui.

(Arata... He's probably playing karuta. I wonder if his grandfather's feeling better...)

They had a Classical Literature lecture that day as well. In the third lecture room, Fujiwara-sensei

spoke about Ise Monogatari.

'Today, we will analyse the “mekaru tomo” episode. This episode is also called. “uruwashiki tomo”. “mekaru tomo” is written with the characters that mean you’ve lost sight of something, and the phrase means that though we can’t meet since we are far apart, while “uruwashiki” is written with the character for beautiful... A beautiful friend means a very important close friend. “In the past, a man had a close friend. They were always together and spent their days together fondly, but his close friend left the land. It was a very sad farewell.”’

(Urgh... Why is it a story like this now?)

– Arata crying, 'We probably won’t see each other again.' Chihaya saying, 'We’ll see each other again – definitely.'

(She probably meant that we would meet at a competition if we continued karuta and became stronger... Why does Chihaya care so much... about seeing Arata again with karuta...)

The rain quietly hit the ground outside the window as the lecture continued.

“It is probably a law of the world that being able to see someone means that you will forget.” The close friend sent a letter like this after a long silence, so he replied like this. “I haven’t thought about not being able to meet, since I always remember you, unable to forget.” Yes... there was a waka like this in the Hyakunin Isshu.

“tachiwakare
inaba no yama no
mine ni ouru – ”

(Even if I depart
and go to Inaba Mountain
on whose peak grow –)

'Mashima-kun?'

'matsutoshi kikaba
ima kaeri kon.'

(pines, if I hear you pine for me,
I will return straightaway to you.)

Taichi ended up responding instinctively once called. The kimariji 'tachi' was for the card 'matsuto'.

'Correct. That’s Mashima-kun for you. Were you listening carefully?'

'Eh? E-er...'

'Or did you remember somebody that you can’t forget?'

When Taichi went bright red, everyone burst out laughing. Somebody called out, 'Is it a girl?'

'It's a guy!'

That just made everyone laugh harder.

'This poem was written by Narihira's older brother, Yukihiro. Yukihiro moved as a government official to Inaba – the current Tottori Prefecture. When he left the people in the capital, he said this poem. "If I hear that you are waiting, I will come home straightaway." Even though he wouldn't have actually been able to do that, he made a promise with those feelings – that he wanted to return no matter what to this person... That person does not have to be a woman. The friend he was so close to may have been male.'

(So that's the meaning of the 'tachi' card...)

'The poems in Ise Monogatari and this poem too – in this time when people might have to wait dozens of days for letters to come, since they didn't have emails and phones like we have now, farewells were much more painful – '

Fujiwara-sensei wrote 'The pain of bidding a close friend farewell' on the board and then continued his lecture.

("I haven't thought about not being able to meet, since I always remember you, unable to forget.")

Taichi reread the words he had written in his notebook. Distance didn't matter if you were thinking of someone, whether they were very far away or in the seat beside you...

-

As Taichi went home in the rain, he saw a thick letter stuck in the postbox by the door. Half of it was sticking out, wet with the rain. Taichi pulled it out and saw just the words 'To Taichi' for the address. On the back, it said 'From Chihaya' – it looked like she had put it in the postbox herself.

'Chihaya... If you need something, call... but I guess she can't, since Mum would hang up on her... I have a mobile, but... I haven't told her my number or my email address... and I don't think she has a mobile anyway.'

That was why she'd sent a letter. they couldn't contact each other easily, even though they lived close by.

'Ha, she's probably just writing to tell me to play karuta. I can tell without reading it.'

Taichi went to his room and then opened the letter without even changing out of his uniform. It was a very long letter.

'I heard there was heavy rain in Fukui, but I wonder if Arata's OK. You're worried too, right? You haven't forgotten about Arata and karuta, right? I won the D-kyuu competition at the beginning of June, so I'm the same as you now, Taichi. C-kyuu. I'm going to become stronger.

'After I told Harada-sensei I wanted to become stronger, he invited me to the competition in Kyoto at the end of June, but Sensei was going to some study thing and Mum was busy going to Okinawa with

my sister for a shoot, so I gave up, since I couldn't go alone.'

Though the letter was long, not one of the words in it blamed Taichi. That alone made Taichi feel like somebody had stabbed him in the chest.

* * *

It was summer. Taichi couldn't beat Hirai in the final exams or the proficiency test on the last day of the summer study camp. Naturally, his mother was in a bad mood.

'All right, Taichi? Even if soccer club is your duty, stop everything else in the second term. I'm going to increase your cram school classes. There must be a problem with the way you're doing things. Let's try a one-on-one tutor who'll tell you what's wrong in an objective way. I'll find a good place.'

'You want me to stop...'

Karuta, Taichi almost said.

He was sure of the reason. His mother had seen Chihaya putting the letters in the post. though Taichi had managed to clear the misunderstanding that it was a love letter, he had had to confess that it was an invitation to play karuta. He hadn't even written a reply. He knew himself that he was escaping into his studies.

(I don't want this to keep continuing. I don't want to keep using studying as an excuse.)

'What?' urged his mother.

'Quitting karuta without saying anything is like running away.'

He wanted cut off his feelings towards karuta – his feelings towards Chihaya and Arata.

(If I quit like this, I'll keep dragging those feelings with me.)

He had decided himself to chase only one thing.

'I'll focus on becoming first in my year at school. I'll quit karuta to do that, so I have a request –'

Taichi's mother spoke without letting Taichi finish.

'If you're going to quit, quit after winning the karuta competition.'

Those were the words Taichi had wanted to say.

-

On the same day, Taichi went to visit Harada-sensei's clinic, which was on the second floor of an office building in the city. Harada-sensei was a general practitioner, focusing on internal medicine and paediatrics. There were no professionals in competitive karuta who had karuta as a hobby with another job, no matter how strong they were.

Timidly, Taichi went to meet Sensei ,who was organizing a medical chart. Sensei would probably be disappointed.

'Sensei, I...'

'Matsuge-kun, you've grown up. Are you taller now? Chihaya-chan's the same as always though, hahaha. Everyone's having their growth spurts.'

Taichi bit his lip. He couldn't say anything since he hadn't seen Chihaya. He would just tell Harada-sensei what he had come to say.

'I want to participate in the C-kyuu competition that's coming up. The one in the scity on the autumn equinox holiday weekend.'

Harada-sensei looked happy.

'I see, I see. There's still time to apply. I'll deal with that right way.'

'Thank you.'

Taichi bowed and was about to turn on his heels when Harada-sensei spoke again.

'Matsuge-kun, what will you do for practice?'

'Sorry, er...'

'That morning, leave your house one hour earlier and come to my house. I'll watch over you.'

Sensei's eyes were warm. Taichi bowed deeply and then put the clinic behind him with a tight feeling in his chest.

-

On the morning of the C-kyuu competition, Harada-sensei just helped Taichi with his karuta as usual without asking anything. Then, when they reached the private railway station that headed to the city, Taichi saw Chihaya waiting in front of the gates. Though she looked cute out of her school uniform, Taichi knew that they weren't Chihaya's style. They were probably from her older sister, Chitose.

'Taichiii, you're awful! You never reply. I'm in the competition today too, so I'll talk to you tons!'

'... Are you participating to talk?'

'It's fine. I'll do my best with karuta too.'

Chihaya grabbed Taichi's sleeve and ran up the stairs to the platform.'

'Hey, hey, Taichi. I'm looking for karuta friends at school every day.'

'If you're searching every day, that just means you haven't found any, right? You probably just put the

cards on the floor and show them how you can pick them up with amazing speed.'

Chihaya's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

'How'd you know? Since I'm stronger, I told them that I'd go one-to-three against them, but then they just backed off... I wonder why? The speed's fun. I can't have any matches at school, since once I take one or two cards, everyone leaves.'

'Ah... Of course they do. The way you focus so much that your breathing is ragged doesn't make people think you just want to have fun with everyone. You probably just think about how fun the speed is, while nobody else thinks about wanting to become faster. Other people might think it would be more fun to play without competing, right?'

'May... be...'

'Er, no...'

Taichi wasn't sure what to reply either. When Harada-sensei urged him to, Taichi murmured, 'Friends are necessary.' He ended up thinking alone.

At the C-kyuu competition's quarterfinals, Taichi and Chihaya ended up facing each other again. They were silent. They didn't even look each other in the eyes before the match started.

(If I win the semifinals, I'll be in B-kyuu. Chihaya wants to become stronger... Is it all right for me to get in her way, when I'm going to quit karuta?)

But Taichi wanted to win. Especially since it was the last time. He didn't want to end this half-heartedly. Taichi intently watched Chihaya practise taking cards. Chihaya looked serious. There was sweat on her forehead.

(... Chihaya will still have chances after this. I just want her to remember that I was strong too.)

'I look forward to playing with you.'

Chihaya's fighting will was clear as she attacked. Forced down by that vigour, Taichi ended up taking cards and losing cards.

(Twelve cards left, with all the ooyamafuda. Luckily, some of the kimariji with four and five characters were karafuda.)

The ooyamafuda that Taichi had were 'asaborake a', 'kimi ga tame ha' and 'wata no hara ko'. Chihaya had 'asaborake u', 'kimi ga tame wo' and 'wata no hara ya'.

(Since 'asa ji' and 'kiri' are karafuda, I need to ignore 'a' and 'ki' if they're read. There were all the 'wa's, but the two 'waga' cards, 'wasura' and 'wabi' are done. 'wasure' is in Chihaya's right middle row.)

<wa>

Taichi aimed for Chihaya's 'wasure' –

<ta no>

(It's not 'wasure'! It's an ooyamafuda!)

Taichi hurried to protect his own 'wata no hara ko' –

<hara ya>

Chihaya took the card in her own row. While listening to the rest of the card - <ama no tsuribune> - Chihaya put the card in the pile behind her, seeming relieved.

(My card wasn't read... So I wasn't lucky this time. But this might bring the luck around. There are two ooyamafuda left –I'll get them.)

<a>

A chain of ooyamafuda – each protected their own card.

<sabarake a>

Chihaya reached for the card Taichi was protecting, but Taichi managed to save it. Chihaya's sigh came clearly to Taichi's ears, as if she had let it out right beside him. The rest of the poem was read – <fururu shirayuki> - and the tensions were high as they waited for the next card.

<ki>

Again? This time, Chihaya came forward for an attack without protecting her own card. Taichi protected his card without any hesitation. With Chihaya, Taichi's hand would be faster in an attack than Chihaya's in a return.

<mi ga tame ha>

Taichi took the card. Though 'murasame no' and 'se wo hayami', cards with one kimariji, were remaining, Taichi took it from 'mu' since two karafuda had been read. 'mu' was an easy to understand character, so everyone's responses were fast. A number of matches reached their end, changing the air of the hall. Taichi felt his shoulders grow lighter. Now, the next card.

<se>

Even among those who responded quickly, Chihaya's hand seemed to fly out before the 's' of 'se' was read.

(Damn, I can't beat her.)

The cards that had become one character kimariji cards with that poem – 'shi' and 'tsu' – were also Chihaya's.

Soon, there were only two cards left. Taichi and Chihaya each had one.

They had taken the same amount up until now, so now it was an unmeisen as to whose card would be read first. Taichi's was 'yo no naka yo' and Chihaya's was 'wasureji no'.

They each protected the card in front of them and waited for it to be read. Taichi's heart hurt from the tension, but in this moment, he had to bear with it.

<chi>

It was a karafuda – one that wasn't in the ones they could take. The tension eased slightly. Taichi worked on recalling which cards had been read so far.

('chigiriki'... There should be no more karafuda. Only two cards left.)

Taichi noticed that their match was the only one that was still going. The cards were only being read for Taichi and Chihaya.

<sue no matsuyama
nami kosaji to wa>

(That never would the waves wash over
Sue-no-Matsu Mountain.)

The reader read the latter half of the earlier karafuda. The people who had finished their matches, the onlookers, those accompanying others – the hall, filled with people, was silent, and nobody breathed except for the reader.

'It;yo>

Everyone there let out their breath. Taichi had his right hand covering the card.

'Thank you very much.'

Chihaya collapsed right then. Taichi froze, in a panic because of the sudden incident. Harada-sensei ran up to them and pulled Chihaya up.

'Chihaya-chan! Can you tell who it is? Chihaya-chan, what's wrong... What, she's just sleeping.'

'Sleeping?'

'Must have used up all her energy.'

Chihaya's hand was still on her 'wasureji no' card.

'An unmeisen between "yo no naka yo / michi koso nakere" and "wasureji no / yukusue made wa"... Matsuge-kun, since "yo no naka wa" was a karafuda, the kimariji became "yo no" partway through the match.'

'Yes. Since "yo mo" was also a karafuda, if it had been read earlier, Chihaya might have taken it.'

He had been lucky today... but if Taichi had to say, he felt like he was somebody who didn't have much luck. Rather than developments like this that were down to luck at the end, he preferred winning earlier with a large difference.... (Ah, but I'm quitting.)

Taichi gritted his teeth together.

Taichi destroyed his anxious opponent during the semifinal and advanced to the final.

Chihaya appeared to revive then, but Taichi went to a place with few people that would suggest to her that he didn't want to be talked to to avoid conversation.

(Just one more match... The last match. There are other things I have to do. Somebody I should win against... Hirai... No, myself.)

He had realised through karuta. If he didn't win against the anxiety to win in his own heart, he would win against no one.

-

When Taichi protected the last card in his row, his opponent still had three cards.

His opponent was soaring high, since both a win and a loss would result in advancing to B-kyuu. It seemed Taichi's opponent thought of it as a throwaway match. As a result, Taichi easily put a gap between him and his higher ranked opponent, who wasn't able to bridge that gap even after becoming serious partway through.

'Taichi! You won!'

Chihaya made a large fuss, as if it was her own win. Strangely, Taichi's heart was calm. No emotions came to him. All he saw was the straight path ahead of him where he would be bound only to studying. That was the only path in the world.

Chihaya was in high spirits.

'Taichi, Taichi, you're amazing.'

Taichi fixed his posture and turned his knees towards Harada-sensei to bow politely.

'Thank you very much for your guidance up until now. Chihaya, I'm quitting karuta.'

Taichi could tell that Chihaya had swallowed her breath, but Taichi stood up. He left the hall alone.

Chihaya's Chapter - Autumn for me Alone



1 – otome no sugata (a maiden's form)

-

‘Why? Why are you quitting karuta?’

It was an autumn night with a bright moon. Ayase Chihaya went to Mashima Taichi’s house and pushed the illuminated intercom button.

The Mashima household was the most splendid in this area. The sounds of the insects in their garden reverberated clearly. However, even this graceful sound did not enter Chihaya’s ears, so hot with emotion her head was.

‘Taichi! Taichi! Hey, Taichi, come out already! Let’s talk properly!’

Even though Chihaya kept calling, no reply came through the intercom. In her irritation, she put her hand on the gate and pushed it forcefully, thinking about climbing over – and then it opened easily without a sound, making Chihaya tip over.

'Be quiet... She'll notice you.'

Taichi had opened the gate slightly and was standing there. He was looking at the illuminated room on the second floor of his house, which was probably the room of his fussy mother.

However, all Chihaya was thinking of was convincing Taichi.

'Taichi, what about the promise with Arata? We said we'd see each other again if we continued karuta.'

His most important promise, which he had made only half a year ago. Chihaya, Taichi and Wataya Arata had made this promise in tears on the day of their parting.

'Don't you want to meet Arata?'

Chihaya slipped half of herself through the gate and grabbed Taichi's wrist. Taichi just stood there without trying to push her away. Chihaya looked at him intently.

'If I stay like this, I won't be able to meet Arata.'

Though Taichi's words were rough, his tone was calm.

Why... Chihaya was about to say that, but she swallowed her words. Taichi wasn't looking away. He was quietly looking into Chihaya's eyes.

'B... B-but, you'll be able to meet him if you get stronger at karuta. At competitions and things.'

'Listen, Chihaya. Continuing karuta or not isn't the point. When we grow up more, we'll be able to meet if we want to, and if we don't want to, there'll be no helping it.'

'No helping it, you say...!'

Chihaya's hand grew slack, and Taichi gently pushed it away. She could see his unshaken expression in the dim lighting.

'Sorry, Chihaya, I... won't meet you... for a while either. Be careful on the way home.'

Taichi pushed Chihaya out of the gate gently and then went back into his house.

The light at the door turned off.

Chihaya just stood there for a while. A dog howling somewhere far away in the residential area brought her back to her senses.

'... Id... Idioooooooooot! Taichi, you idiot! You idiot you idiot you idiot!'

After shouting, Chihaya burst into tears.

Chihaya couldn't remember how she returned home. In tears, she had run, run, and run. When she collapsed just inside the door to her house, her heart was hurting so much she had thought it would burst.

With no strength left, her head had gone blank... Before she'd noticed, she was in bed, and her mother was looking at her in surprise.

'Chihaya! Were you sleeping this whole time!? What about school?'

'School...?'

(It's morning? My head hurts... I feel so tired. I can't get up...)

Chihaya's thoughts were sluggish. Her body felt heavy... but it was cold, like there was a hole in her which wind was blowing through.

'It's past noon already... Ah, so the call from school this morning was about Chihaya!' exclaimed Chihaya's mother, hugging her head. 'I was thinking it was strange when the school called this morning, since I'd already called yesterday saying that Chitose was going to take a day off since she had a photo shoot... When they asked me what Ayase-san was doing, I just said that she was taking a day off and hung up.'

Chihaya's older sister, Chitose, was a model for a fashion magazine for middle and high-school students.

At the end of last year, her sister had reached the last stage of the national beauty pageant and had been scouted by a model agency as a result. After a number of auditions, she had been exclusively hired by a magazine at the beginning of summer. Her mother was always busy accompanying her sister. She had probably dropped off her sister at the shoot location today too. It was an outdoor shoot and there had been many cloudy days recently, so it seemed that she had temporarily returned to prepare dinner.

'Chihaya... Do you have a fever? You look pale.'

Chihaya's mother placed a hand on Chihaya's forehead.

'It's a slight fever. I need to go back to Chitose now though... I wonder if Harada-sensei will come.'

Chihaya's mother's voice started growing farther away, and Chihaya's vision was growing foggier too.

-

Nobody was there. Chihaya was alone in this white space. She looked around.

Sailor uniforms... Girls wearing the uniform for the school Chihaya attended, Higashi-Oosato Middle School, were chatting at a long distance. Chihaya could hear their voices clearly.

'What club will you join?'

'There are a lot of cool upperclassmen in the basketball club!'

'Let's go already!'

Wait! Chihaya ran after them. She called out in a loud voice.

'Hey, want to play karuta together?'

The girls stopped and turned around. Sneering red lips suddenly appeared on their featureless faces.

'Why karuta? Nobody'll play something uncool like that.'

'Chihaya-chan's seriously weird.'

'Can't keep up with her – she just talks about karuta. She doesn't know about anything on TV.'

They laughed loudly and then turned around.

Chihaya's heart hurt. Her throat and stomach hurt too – she couldn't even call out to tell them to wait.

When she crouched, a shadow fell on her. She looked up and saw Taichi there, expressionless.

Chihaya pleaded, 'Taichi! Taichi, you'll play karuta, right?'

'I'm going to quit karuta. I won't meet with you either, Chihaya.'

Taichi's feet moved too quickly for Chihaya to cling to them, and he disappeared.

'N-no! Don't leave me alone – don't leave me!'

-

Chihaya woke up to her own scream. At the same time, her mother and a middle-aged man she recognised rushed in.

'Chihaya-chan, what's wrong?'

'Harada... hic... sense... i...'

It looked like Chihaya's mother had asked Harada-sensei to come because of his regular occupation.

'Sensei, I'm really alone... hic... now... Taichi – Taichi...'

Chihaya couldn't speak through her tears. Sensei held back Chihaya's mother, who was at a loss. Sensei was wearing a white doctor's gown unlike his clothes at the karuta competition. He knelt by Chihaya's bed and put their eyes at the same height.

'Matsuge-kun will come back one day... I want to say that, but I don't know either, so I won't tell a lie to give you hope.'

Chihaya couldn't keep crying after hearing Sensei's pained voice.

'... If at least you keep loving karuta, Chihaya-chan, that'll make me happy enough. Now drink this. Then I'll take your temperature, and you can show me your throat. I'll check your heartbeat too.'

Harada-sensei held out a sports drink. Chihaya took it. Harada-sensei confirmed that she had drunk it and then took out a stethoscope and thermometer from his consultation bag.

* * *

Harada-sensei determined that Chihaya had a cold and was exhausted, so Chihaya took another day off school. The person who came to bring her printouts for the homework was the school year committee member, Horikawa Michiru. Since Michiru's elementary school had been different from Chihaya's, it was probably quite a detour for her to come to Chihaya's house.

Chihaya didn't have friends who were close enough to her that they would say, 'I'll bring the printouts for Chihaya.' Michiru, with her short hair, was wearing a jersey as she stood at the front of Chihaya's house.

'Horikawa-san... thanks for coming, even though it's so far.'

'Don't worry about it. I often run this way for training on my own.'

Chihaya recalled that Horikawa-san was a long-distance runner in the track and field club.

'Ayase-san, during tomorrow's Japanese class, we're going to start the page for Taketori Monogatari. You like that sort of thing, right? Stuff about princesses from ancient times.'

So come to school – that was what Michiru's kind smile was saying.

Chihaya was about to say, 'That's not it,' but she stopped herself. Normally she would have gone and said, 'I like karuta! The hyakunin isshu! How about you, Horikawa-san?' However, that had made her alone. She didn't want to feel alone any longer.

'There're people like that sometimes. Those that like princesses and Japanese culture, history, that sort of thing.'

'Er, Horikawa-san, what do you mean by... Taketori...?'

Michiru looked surprised.

'Princess Kaguya! The first story of Japan written by Murasaki Shikibu in Genji Monogatari – '

This amount of knowledge was expected of the honour student who continuously fought for first and second place.

'Murasaki? What's that? ... What, I think I've heard of it somewhere...'

'In the Hyakunin Isshu, right? What was it, er... “meguri aite” (As I was wondering) or something.'

’“me” and “kumo”!’

When Chihaya suddenly leant forward, Michiru took a step or two back.

‘I see, “me” is for Princess Kaguya, so the moon comes out.’

‘It’s a bit different...’ That was what Michiru murmured, but Chihaya missed it. She felt very much like going back to school.

-

Michiru had said that sometimes there were people who liked Japanese culture.

(Though the person who said that didn’t like it much herself.)

That sentence gave Chihaya strength, so she started making a poster by hand.

Though there hadn’t been anyone in her class... or year, Chihaya realised that if she searched the whole school, there might be someone who liked karuta.

(Who cares about Taichi. I’ll definitely, definitely make new friends. There’re deeeefinitely people that like karuta.)

Chihaya wanted to quickly forget her frustration and sadness, so she focussed on making her posters. She put dozens of them up around the school.

‘Hyakunin Isshu!! Would you like to play competition karuta together? Contact Ayase, class 1-3.’

However, they were quickly taken down and thrown out. A member of the student council came along with the guidance teacher to Chihaya’s classroom and told her not to put up posters without permission.

‘Take off all the remaining ones.’

Chihaya felt depressed as her classmates giggled around her. Then, somebody placed a hand on her shoulder – it was Michiru.

‘I’ll help, Ayase-sa... Chihaya-chan.’

Michiru said Chihaya’s given name, seeming just a bit embarrassed.

‘Horikawa’s got it tough. The committee members even have to look after troublemakers like that,’ said one of the boys. The girls were looking at Michiru pityingly too. Michiru’s personality was probably why nobody was saying she was just doing it for points with the teachers. Michiru was a girl who was kind to the bottom of her heart with no hidden intentions.

‘Sorry...’

‘It’s nothing to apologise for, Chihaya-chan.’

'I'll get permission this time. I'll make an official club too with the student council's permission. A karuta club.'

'That's...'

Michiru looked like she didn't know what to say in response, but she accompanied Chihaya to the middle staircase to take down the posters –

And there was a female student with her long hair in a ponytail. She was looking at the poster. She was tall, but under her skirt, she had on thick knee supporters and aluminium crutches in both hands.

'Ah... Inaba-senpai.'

The student turned around at Michiru's voice. Michiru bowed deeply.

'Do you know her, Horikawa-san?'

'She's Inaba Nao-senpai from the track and field club. She's in class 3-4.'

'Inaba-senpai then.'

Then, before Michiru had time to stop, Chihaya brightly ran up to Inaba.

'Do you like karuta?'

In Inaba's confusion, Chihaya introduced herself. 'I'm Ayase Chihaya. I put up these posters. Let's play karuta together! It's fine – I'll explain how. I participate in karuta competitions.'

Inaba hesitantly nodded at Chihaya's vigour.

'I rather like taking the Hyakunin Isshu karuta... Like during New Year's with my family. I've even won a competition at my elementary school.'

'Really? That's great! Let's play karuta together! OK? OK? OK?'

Chihaya grabbed Inaba's hand, which made her drop her crutch. It hit the ground loudly. Inaba staggered, and Michiru hurriedly helped support her.

'Chihaya-chan, be careful. Senpai, are you all right?'

'Sorry, you're injured, aren't you? I hope you get better soon.'

'Y-yes... me too.'

'So when will you start karuta? I'm OK with you starting today!'

Inaba turned serious as she looked at Chihaya's excited expression.

'... Er, there's one thing I want to ask. If you're OK with that, I'd like to play karuta.'

'What is it? I'll listen to anything. I'll even go around the school building on my hands!'

Inaba took a deep breath and then whispered in Chihaya's ear.

'Just teach me love poems.'

Chihaya's mind went blank, unable to understand the words she had heard.

'Lo...? What poems...?'

Then, a student jumped down a flight of stairs to snatch Inaba in a hug. The short-haired girl glared at Chihaya.

'This is dangerous – don't just go around like that! Hey, Horikawa-san, is this girl your friend? Be careful!'

'Sorry, Yamabe-senpai!'

Michiru held out the crutch and bowed her head. The short-haired girl took it and gave it to Inaba, and then she gave Inaba her shoulder for support as they went up the stairs. Inaba's feet were unsteady, and it looked like she could only go up the steps one at a time.

'Ah... I was still in the middle of talking...'

'Chihaya-chan, the girl just now was Yamabe Nonoka-senpai from the track and field club. She's in the same class as Inaba-senpai.'

'Then I'll go to their classroom afterwards. Thanks for telling me.'

'Er, but...'

According to Michiru, Inaba's injury was from a traffic accident right before summer. Since it took two months to heal, she had probably only started coming back to school recently.

'Yamabe-senpai and Inaba-senpai are friends, so she was really worried. When Inaba-senpai came this morning to the practice to say she would continue to take a break from club, Yamabe-senpai leant her a shoulder the whole time.'

'I see...'

If Inaba was taking a break from club, she might be able to play a lot of karuta, thought Chihaya. However, she didn't get to meet Inaba that day, since she had left early to go to the hospital.

-

Chihaya met Inaba the next day. The wind was strong since a typhoon was coming.

It was their monthly long cleaning time, during which everyone changed into jerseys. Chihaya and Michiru's class were in charge of the student entrance. They took off the floor slats where people

changed their shoes and wiped away the dirt with a brush. As Chihaya rubbed away mindlessly, she heard a familiar yell.

'Inaba-senpai!'

Chihaya ran towards the source of the voice, and Michiru hurriedly ran after her.

'What's wrong?'

'I heard Inaba-senpai's and the other... Yamabe-senpai's voices from the courtyard. They shrieked so I was wondering what to do.'

'Really? I didn't hear anything.'

'They definitely did.'

After declaring that, Chihaya ran and Michiru followed her. Chihaya's hair became a mess in the wind.

'Chihaya-chan, I've thought this ever since seeing you in gym, but you're fast.'

'Ah, yeah, but I couldn't win at the sports festival. I was afraid of the pistol and started late. They don't have to let out such a loud noise!'

-

In the school courtyard, there was a large zelkova tree by the rubbish shed at the door. When Chihaya and Michiru got there, Yamabe was in her jersey on the roof of the steel rubbish shed, waving a long fallen branch at one of the branches of the zelkova tree.

Inaba seemed nervous as she watched. She only had one of her crutches.

'It's fine. We can just make a new flag. It's dangerous, Nonoka.'

'But I'm almost there.'

Yamabe waved the branch with large motions as she stood on her tip toes... and then the strong wind made her lose her balance. She fell off the roof.

'Ah! Watch out!' screamed Inaba.

Chihaya and Michiru caught Yamabe.

'Are you all right? Good thing you didn't hit the ground,' said Chihaya with a smile.

'Are you all right, senpai?' asked Michiru.

'Horikawa-san? Thank you, really... And you are...?'

Yamabe cocked her head, like she was trying to place where she had seen Chihaya before. Then, she

turned towards Inaba.

'Nao, are you OK? Sorry.'

'I'm fine. Sorry for making you do something like this. Er, you're... the Hyakunin Isshu girl from the other day.'

'Yes, my name is Ayase Chihaya! When I heard your voice, Inaba-senpai, I just wondered what happened.'

'I don't think you could've heard it from the entrance though...' said Michiru, seeming puzzled, but Chihaya didn't pay her any attention. She climbed onto the roof that Yamabe had been on earlier and looked up at the zelkova's branches.

Chihaya found Inaba's silver-coloured crutch caught on the branch, together with a colourful cloth.

'Ah, there's a crutch there. Wait, I'll get it.'

Chihaya wrapped herself around the thick zelkova trunk and started climbing.

'Wait, Chihaya-chan!'

'Leave it to me! I was faster than anyone at climbing the trees on the mountain behind my elementary school.'

'Even if you say that, it's dangerous...'

While Michiru and the others watched nervously, Chihaya reached the branch in question and reached out for the crutch. The folded fabric spread out in the wind.

'Ah, is this a flag to cheer your class on? You made this for the next class match, right?' asked Chihaya, still on the branch.

'Yes, it flew away when we were drying our brushes on the balcony,' replied Yamabe from directly under the tree. 'I tried to get it with a mop, but it was so heavy that my arms got tired. Just when I was thinking about what to do, Nao suddenly threw her crutch.'

'I thought that I could knock it down since the crutch has a good weight to it. A fallen branch would be too light,' said Inaba with a wry smile.

Yamabe looked miffed as she nudged Inaba.

'Sometimes you really don't think about what to do.'

'Then, you said, "What should we do?" I heard you earlier.'

'Don't push yourself,' replied Inaba, but Chihaya just smiled and waved her hand. The wind had wrapped the flag around the crutch.

'It's fine, it's fine... Ah!'

Maybe because Chihaya had been waving her hand or because of the wind, Chihaya suddenly toppled forward. The three people underneath the tree shrieked in unison.

Chihaya immediately grabbed the flag and slid down the trunk. Leaves were caught in her short hair, and she rubbed her grazed cheek with a full-faced smile.

'See? I got it.'

Chihaya held out the flag and the crutch inside it.

'Chihaya-san...' said Inaba, letting out a sigh of relief. 'Thank you. Sorry for causing you trouble too.'

Yamabe pushed aside Inaba, who had taken the crutch, and started yelling at Chihaya.

'Why did you do that? It's dangerous! I was about to ask a teacher to borrow clippers for the tree.'

'Eh? I got it though!' said Chihaya, who didn't understand.

Michiru pulled Chihaya's hand.

'Let's go back. They'll think we skipping out.'

Inaba took Yamabe's hand to pacify her and smiled shyly.

'Thank you, Chihaya-san. You really helped us out. Sometimes I'm a bit... I hurt this foot in the same way. I ran out into the street to save a kitten. Nonoka's just embarrassed, so don't worry about it.'

'Em... embarrassed? What are you talking about? This girl just did too – '

Yamabe's cheeks were red, which made Chihaya suddenly like her.

(I'll become friends with these two!)

Chihaya was determined.

'Yamabe-senpai's really nice. I want to be helpful to Inaba-senpai, just like Yamabe-senpai!'

Michiru, Inaba and Yamabe looked at Chihaya.

'Inaba-senpai is interested in karuta too. I'll help you from now on, Inaba-senpai. When Yamabe-senpai and at times like that. If you have any problems, tell me at any time! I'd be happy if you'd play karuta with me too.'

Inaba thought for a while and then replied, 'Thank you. Then I'll accept your feelings. And, about karuta... I'd like to play if it's for love poems...'

Yamabe poked Inaba, looking anxious.

'What are you talking about? Karuta? Love? Is this about those really old stories you read in hospital? Why are you suddenly... Didn't you promise to do rehab and come back to track and field?'

'Sorry, Nonoka... My foot... it'll still take some time.'

'Hm... so this is to keep you from getting bored until your leg heals, Nao?'

Inaba had a vague smile on her face, and Michiru looked at Inaba and Yamabe in concern. Meanwhile, Chihaya thought about what Inaba had said.

(Love... Poems that have 'love'... I think there was only the kimariji 'koisu chou' (I'm in love').)

'Inaba-senpai... there's only one card that starts with the character for love.'

When Chihaya cocked her head, Inaba wrote the kanji for love in the air.

'Love. There are other poems with love in them in their meaning – '

'Ah, I see! If you can make those your speciality, you'll play karuta then!' said Chihaya excitedly, grabbing Inaba's hands in hers. She still had leaves in her hair, blowing in the wind.

Inaba smiled wryly and nodded, giving in.

'Chihaya-chan, that's great. You've found someone to play karuta with you.'

'Yeah, it's thanks to you, Horikawa-san! I'll ask the guidance teacher to let me borrow a room after school and get permission to bring karuta cards and CDs! when I brought cards last time, I was told off. Something about school rules. I mean, they're in the third-years' textbooks so third-years can bring them, but first-years can't. It's strange, right?'

'... Chihaya-chan, you wouldn't bend to anyone, would you,' murmured Michiru.

'Eh? I bend. I have a flexible body. Look.'

Chihaya jumped up the stairs and then touched the step below her toes with her fingers. Inaba and Michiru burst out laughing, and Yamabe shrugged as well, like she thought there was no helping the situation.

2 – kimi ga tame (for your sake)

-

A few days after Chihaya met Inaba and Yamabe, Chihaya was in a classroom after school, pushing the desks to the sides of the room. She put down the mats for martial arts classes that she had brought from the distant P.E. equipment room.

'Can't believe one girl did this by herself...' said Yamabe, looking shocked as she came in with Inaba,

who had her crutches

'It's no good if it's hard to pick up cards from the floor directly. Tatami would be better, but the school didn't have any.'

Chihaya laid out cards on the mat. She tried knocking one away, but then her expression turned glum.

'Eh, the cards won't leap up the way I want them to. It's completely different from tatami.'

'I think it's because these mats are made with material that doesn't have much rebound so that it won't hurt even if you hit it during judo,' replied Inaba. She walked up and took a card in her hand.

'These are different from the ones at homes. They have fall leaves on the back and are smooth. These white ones with no words are... Ah, just in case you lose some? That's good preparation.'

'These are official cards for competitive use. I think the ones you have at home are probably for personal use. They have pictures on the yomifuda and you can play bouzu mekuri with them, right?'

'Oh, so they're different.' Yamabe peered at the cards.

Chihaya had been kneeling properly on the mat even as they talked, swiftly lining up the fifty cards into two groups of twenty-five. Using the length of her arm from the elbow down, she measured a good location to put the cards. Inaba watched with interest.

'Inaba-senpai, I'm finished with the preparations. Please sit down over there.'

After Chihaya said that, Inaba looked troubled.

'Eh... Chihaya-san and Nonoka can play first.'

'Please don't restrain yourself. I'll explain how to play.'

Chihaya put a finger on the 'matsutoshi kikaba' (if I hear you pine for me) card in front of Inaba.

'For example, this "tachi" card in front of you... Er, the poem is "tachiwakare / inaba no yama no" (Even if I depart / and go to Inaba Mountain), but if you hear 'tachi', you take the "motsutoshi kikaba ima kaeri kon" card. Since "inaba" is on this card, please remember it – '

As Chihaya kept talking, Yamabe put a hand on Chihaya's shoulder. She looked irritated.

'You blockhead. Nao's knee can only bend to a right angle! She can't kneel.'

Ah... Chihaya looked at the supporters on Inaba's two knees and then bowed her head.

'Sorry, I was just really into it. Let's use a desk. We can do this in chairs.'

Chihaya had invited the girls in her class a number of times and played on desks. When Chihaya took cards after only a few syllables, not listening to the rest of the poems, the girls were put off and everyone ran away. It seemed that those girls thought that you looked for the torifuda after the

yomifuda was read.

Chihaya put together four desks and laid down the cards again. Then, she and Inaba sat opposite each other. Yamabe stood beside Inaba.

'Then can we start? You have fifteen minutes to memories. Remember where the cards are in your own cards and your opponent's. Please do what I do,' declared Chihaya, putting on airs.

In the end, Inaba and Yamabe just stared at the cards for a while. Inaba asked in resignation, 'Chihaya-san, is there a trick to remembering these? Why are you moving your hands?'

Chihaya, who had been murmuring while moving her hands with her chair at a distance from the desks, hurriedly sat up again. However, up until now, everyone had just been avoiding her. Being asked about something was a big step to making friends who played karuta.

'Er, well, this is image training. I imagine myself taking the card to remember it. This helps the cards get into my head more than just memorising them. I mean, as the competition goes on, the position of the cards changes, right? I imagine I'm tying each card with a string to my hand, making them my own.'

Chihaya supplemented her explanation with excited gestures, and Yamabe and Inaba nodded, but they couldn't even memorise half of the positions of the cards.

Soon, the fifteen minutes were over.

'OK, for the CD, we'll start with the opening poem. The poem called "sakuya kono hana" is called the opening poem. It's not in the torifuda, and it means "get ready". We take cards starting from the poem after this one.'

Chihaya used a remote controller to operate the CD player, which was on another desk, and then opening poem played.

<naniwazu ni
sakuya kono hana
fuyu gomori
ima wo harube to
sakuya kono hana
ima wo harube to
sakuya kono hana>

(In Naniwa Bay,
now the flowers are blossoming.
After lying dormant all winter,
now the spring has come
and the flowers are blossoming.
Now the spring has come
and the flowers are blossoming.)

Suddenly, the air around Chihaya changed. Yamabe let out a small 'Ah' noise, as if she'd noticed.

<aki no>

The moment Chihaya heard 'no', her right arm shot out, making about half the cards in front of her scatter, falling from the desk to the floor.

'Ah, wait, wait!'

Chihaya hurriedly stopped the music player.

'It's slippery! The table is slippery! If I play seriously, all the cards will fly off!'

Chihaya hadn't realised this before because everyone in her class had run off before she could play seriously. She had gone at full power without thinking.

'You're so fast that I didn't understand what was happening at all, Chihaya-san,' said Inaba, sounding troubled as Chihaya picked up the cards from the floor.

'Ah, er, there are these things called kimariji, and when you hear them, you know which cards you can take, so you take the cards when you hear them. That's karuta.'

'I've heard about this from my granny, but...'

'In the fifteen minutes before the match, you imagine which cards to take when you hear which syllables and how to take cards if there are similar sounds. There are fifty cards, so it's only half of the hundred cards – you imagine which cards won't be read too.'

'I... I understand, but... let's do this more slowly – '

'I played with someone amazing at first too. That's how I found out that karuta was amazing!'

Chihaya was serious. Her shock when she first saw Arata's karuta – she wanted to somehow express the impact she had received from Arata then. That was what had made her so focussed on inviting so many people to play.

'Is that OK? Let's go on to the next one.'

After confirming with Inaba, Chihaya pressed the remote controller's button. She focussed on her ears –

<haru su>

Another twenty or so cards flew again, and this time, they were on Inaba's side. Chihaya stuck her head forward, which made Inaba lean back in surprise.

'Ah, they flew off the table again. It looks like I'll have to take the cards by pressing them down.'

'Wait, wait. I didn't hear "su" now... You took the card before it was read.'

I heard it though. The first breath of the “s” of “su”.’

Chihaya looked pleased, but Yamabe had her arms crossed and made a clucking noise with her tongue as she stood beside Inaba.

‘How can we tell!? Chihaya, you just want to play, don’t you? Teach properly.’

‘Yes... Sorry.’

‘We know this poem too – it’s in the third-year’s Japanese textbook. It’s Empress Jito’s poem the Manyoshu, right? The Manyoshu and the Hyakunin Isshu use slightly different words though. There’s something strange about you being faster than Nao for this,’ said Yamabe with a frown.

‘Manyoshu...?’

‘... You don’t know it?’ asked Inaba.

Chihaya nodded.

‘You’re not playing karuta because you like old texts and waka and that sort of thing, Chihaya-san?’

‘I play because I like taking the cards...’

Inaba looked even more troubled.

‘I like waka and the elegance of poems about love, so... competitive karuta is different then.’

‘A-anyway, if you play, you’ll see how amazing and interesting it is!’

(I need to show her how amazing speed is. The amazing karuta that I know! I’m the only person who can express it, here and now.)

‘Karuta is a competitive sport. Speed, attack, the desire to win... That’s what’s interesting about it!’

‘Ah... That’s true, but then aren’t the poems just a means then...? From how you’re saying it.’

‘Yes!’

‘That’s... different, I think... from the karuta I want to play. Using the elegant correspondence of love poems in a way like this...’

‘Not... the karuta you want to play?’

Chihaya was troubled. What karuta did Inaba want to play then? She looked at Inaba.

Inaba chose her words before speaking admonishingly.

‘I want to immerse myself in world of dynastic love. Love from a thousand years ago, love letters in poems, falling in love through a poem without even seeing the person’s face. With vexing yet restrained feelings growing... I want to let my heart flutter in a world like that.’

Chihaya didn't really understand what Inaba was saying, but she could easily tell that Inaba was disappointed by Chihaya's words and attitude. But Inaba had said she would play karuta. Chihaya didn't want to give up here.

'Chihaya-san, I don't need to karuta to be amazing. I just want to like waka.'

('like', rather than being amazing... Ah, I get it. I love karuta now. At first, I might have just thought karuta was amazing, but that changed to 'like' soon after.)

Like, like, like – that word grasped Chihaya's heart and echoed in her chest.

(I see! I just need her to 'like' karuta somehow! Even if it's not fast.)

– 'Other people might think it would be more fun to play without competing, right?'

Chihaya could hear Taichi's words in her ear.

'Right, you won't like it if it's not fun. Sorry for being selfish. It'll be best to play in a way that you'll think it's fun. I want you to enjoy karuta too, Inaba-senpai.'

'... Then I'd be happy if you'd play slowly with me. It seems I'm more familiar with love poems, so let's remember them together.'

'OK!'

With this change in mood, Chihaya played the CD for the third time.

<ashi>

Though Chihaya's hand swung in the air, Inaba's hand was on the 'ashi no maroya ni / akikaze zo fuku' card in Chihaya's upper left row.

'biki no / yamadori no o no / shidari no o no' continued to play.

'That was a karafuda just now. The "naga na" card that isn't here... That one's completely different. It's "yuu".'

'Ah, sorry. I just...'

'One of my cards will go to your side then, since you touched the card. Please put it wherever you want.'

'Oh, so there's a penalty,' said Yamabe in admiration.

'When you take your opponent's card, you send one of your own too. These are called okurifuda.'

Chihaya pointed at the cards and began to explain moving the cards.

'You win if you get rid of the twenty-five cards in front of you first.'

'So you get rid of all the cards in front of you first. I do feel excited when I see your speed though, Chihaya,' murmured Yamabe, sounding like her curiosity had been piqued.

'Yes! Yamabe-senpai, I'm so happy you understand!'

Yamabe hurriedly hid her surprised face. Inaba started giggling.

'Chihaya-san, you're really energetic when you play karuta.'

'Yes! Please receive my energy!' said Chihaya, in high spirits since she felt like Inaba had forgiven her.

'To the next one then! Let's go slowly, slowly.'

She played the CD.

<tako>

Chihaya, slowly putting out her hand, could tell that Inaba was reaching for the correct card as she swept both the card and Inaba's hand away. Inaba fell off her chair from the recoil.

'Ah, ouch...'

Chihaya was shocked by this unexpected event. She couldn't believe that going slowly would have the opposite effect.

'I'm sorry!'

'What are you doing? Be careful!' yelled Yamabe as she helped Inaba up. 'Nao's legs are weak now, so it's the same as sitting without her feet on the floor. That means her balance is bad and she'll fall over easily.'

'I'm sorry! I'll be more careful!'

Yamabe glared at Chihaya, who apologised furiously.

'Chihaya, it's your fault for being so rough.'

'It's... my fault?'

Inaba looked at Chihaya, who was cowering. Yamabe spoke clearly to make Inaba turn towards her.

'Nao, let's stop this. Play with me instead. Chihaya's dangerous – she doesn't look at other people at all.'

'But I... let me play with Chihaya-san a bit more.'

Inaba stared at the cards.

'I mean, Chihaya-san's so serious. But how do I say it... I don't want to let go of the cards for the poems I like either.'

Inaba placed two cards on the table. 'mono ya omou to / hito no tou made' and 'hito shirezu koso / omoi someshi ka'.

'Both are poems about painful feelings. I don't want these cards to be taken in a violent manner like Chihaya-san's, so I want to take them faster myself.'

Violent... It was true, Chihaya reflected with some remorse. But only friends would directly tell you your bad points. These two were like Taichi in this way. It made Chihaya happy. She was also happy that Inaba had cards she liked.

'Ah, I finally get what I want to ask you, Chihaya-san.'

Inaba looked relieved.

'The love poems in the Hyakunin Isshu that I like. Please teach me how to protect the love poem cards from my opponent and how to take them.'

'Taking the cards you like – the cards you don't want to let go of earlier than your opponent... There are many strategies, like how you put down your cards.'

'That's it! I'll tell you which cards are the love poems that I like, so teach me tips and strategies to take the cards quicker. I want to protect my favourite love poems with my own hands.'

Even if they thought differently, Chihaya expected that if they walked together with the feelings of fondness for the cards, the path ahead would open up. Chihaya and Inaba smiled at each other.

'Hey, Nonoka, let me play a bit longer.'

Yamabe reluctantly let go of Inaba.

'Today, we can go by the poem numbers first. I want to see how your hands can go so fast, Chihaya-san.'

'An example then. I'll do my best!'

Chihaya pressed down the feeling of being so happy she could float and bowed. She pressed the remote controller button.

<oku>

The card in the bottom left – just as Chihaya noticed the loud sound, her foot was in midair. Her stomach heart. Chihaya's body had hit the table, which fell over, and now she was bent over. Her ankle hit the ground.

'Hey! Chihaya, move that away!'

'Eh... Ah!'

Underneath the fallen table, Chihaya could see Inaba and Yamabe's sailor uniform tops. A number of cards had fallen on their shoulders and heads. The two of them were on the floor under the table, the cards all around them.

'Move it away already!'

Chihaya picked up the desk and Yamabe crawled out from underneath.

'Nao, Nao! Chihaya, help me pull her up!'

Yamabe's voice, nearly a shriek, went over the CD player's 'aki wa kanashiki'.

'It hurts...' moaned Inaba, clutching her knees. Her face was pale. Yamabe must have seen that, because she sat up, pushed away Chihaya's proffered hand and yelled, 'Leave! Nao's never going to play karuta with you again!'

* * *

(I did something awful to Inaba-senpai... Even though she was nice enough to play karuta with me...)

Chihaya, depressed, burrowed under the covers of her bed.

(At a time like this, what would Arata... what would Taichi do? How do you better show your friends how fun karuta is?)

Chihaya had just let out a sigh when her older sister, Chitose, came into the room.

'What are you so gloomy for? If you're showing remorse for something, it might end up snowing tomorrow.'

'Maybe lightning, if there were a typhoon...'

'Don't joke about that. My outdoor shoot is tomorrow since it was delayed after the typhoon... Come on, I'll give you a special treat and let you see the newest magazine I'm in.'

Chitose tapped Chihaya with a fashion magazine through the blanket. Chihaya truly respected her sister and her work, so normally, she would have jumped up in happiness.

'It's fine...'

'Even though I went out of my way to let you see? Somebody thought you were a pain for trying to get them to play karuta again, right? Stop playing karuta already! It's so old and uncool.'

Chihaya didn't have the energy to object. Chitose might have lost her will to continue since Chihaya didn't retort, as she just flipped through the pages of the magazine unenergetically... And then her eyebrows flew up.

'Wait, what is this!? It's so ugly and lame! I don't want my photo on the page after this!'

Chitose threw the magazine onto Chihaya's pillow and stomped out of the room.

Even if Chihaya was depressed, she really did look forward to seeing her sister's photos. Curious, Chihaya reached out from the blankets for the magazine. She glanced at the open page.

'Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!'

She shrieked in a strange manner and thrust her blankets off her.

'I-i-i-it's so cuuuuuuute!'

Chihaya's older sister had declared it ugly, but the new fashion goods character had gripped Chihaya's heart. It looked like a bear, but the design made you think of an exhausted middle-aged man.

'How do you read this English? Da... Da... Daddy... bear? It's brilliant! Super cute!'

This was the moment that Chihaya fell in love with Daddy Bear.

-

On the weekend a few days afterwards, Chihaya invited Michiru and took the private line from the closest station. Under the school rules, when leaving the city, they needed permission from the school and wore school uniforms.

'Chihaya-chan, is it that cute?'

'Yeah! It's the cutest things I've ever seen. They have a showroom in the character shop building at K Station, and you can only buy the goods there.

The article in the magazine had said that. Chihaya had asked her parents to give her her allowance in advance so that she could buy Daddy Bear goods.

The train was rather crowded. All the seats were filled, and there were the same number of people standing.

'Ah... Inaba-senpai.'

Inaba, with her metal crutches and in her uniform, was standing in the back of the same car. Though she was leaning against the door, she staggered every time the train shook. It looked difficult.

'I heard that she has to go really far for physiotherapy,' murmured Michiru.

'I need to say sorry. I haven't met her since that – she's taken a break from school,' said Chihaya to Michiru. Then, she walked p to Inaba, who was staring out the car window vacantly.

Outside the train window, which had stopped at a signaling point, there were students who were doing

athletic club activities on the weekend, running along the tracks as they shouted. Inaba looked away from the sight and watched her footing.

Chihaya spoke in a voice as strong as the sound of the train wheels, which had started to move.

'Excuse me... I'm sorry!'

Inaba staggered in shock and hit the railing. It looked painful.

(Senpai has no strength in her legs.)

Chihaya hurriedly supported Inaba's shoulder. Michiru ran over as well.

'I did too much. I'm really sorry. I'll be careful from now on.'

(I'll think of karuta that Senpai can play too. Karuta that Senpai will enjoy, karuta that'll cheer her up.)

Chihaya reconfirmed those thoughts as she supported Inaba, thinking all the way that Inaba's hair smelt nice.

'No, I was the one who asked. I'm sorry too. Nonoka said some rude things.'

'Not at all! Yamabe-senpai really loves Inaba-senpai – I thought it was nice.'

Inaba smiled, looking embarrassed.

'Will you play karuta with me again? I'll think of a way that you'll be able to play too without it being dangerous!'

Inaba nodded.

'Your eyes really sparkle when you talk about karuta, Chihaya-san.'

Inaba's words made Chihaya so happy her shoulders went up to her ears. Her heart was fluttering, and it felt a bit impatient.

'I need to like karuta more too, so that I won't lose.'

With a smile, Inaba started explaining, bit by bit.

'When I was hospitalised for my injury, my granny came to the hospital every day instead of my mother, since she was busy with work, but we didn't have anything to talk about... It wasn't like this when I was a kid, but there weren't any topics that we had in common.'

When Inaba was in hospital, she showed a few pages of her summer workbook "Get to Know Waka" to her grandmother. When her grandmother explained the points she didn't understand to her, Inaba felt like she had found the poems for the first time.

'Then I suddenly had tears in my eyes... I don't know why...'

It had made her remember how much she loved her granny when she was a child, and how her granny had done so much for her, watching over her until now. Inaba's eyes were distant.

'I had forgotten since I was focussed on living in the present, but I remembered that warm time from when I was a kid with no worries, and then I thought about how I would never be able to return to that time, and it was painful.

'To cheer me up, Granny brought old books and manga about Heian princesses which I had really liked when I was younger... And then I completely got into it. Books with old poems and analysis books on the Hyakunin Isshu – my granny brought them all for me.

'I kept reading to forget the pain in my leg. Even the difficult books... Izumi Shikibu, Michitsuna's mother, Murasaki Shikibu... Even people from a millennium ago felt many things with their big hearts. I just thought people were amazing.'

'Izumi Shikibu... and whose mother?'

'For the Hyakunin Isshu, in order, they're "arazaran", "nageki tsutsu" and "meguri aite".'

'"arazaran"! There are a lot of cards that start with "a", but that's the first I remembered.'

Chihaya leant forward, which made Inaba laugh slightly.

'You have the word of karuta inside you, don't you, Chihaya-san. A world with fifty white cards lined up perfectly.'

'Ah... Yes, hm... Yes, it feels like my whole body is filled with karuta.'

'I have the world of the Heian era within me too. The cards with love poems are connected to my world. That's why I don't want to let anyone take them. I realised when I was playing karuta with you, Chihaya-san. At first, that feeling was vague, and I just wanted to play karuta, but now I understand it clearly.'

After that, Inaba told Chihaya the love poems she knew until she had to get off the train a station earlier. All Chihaya could respond with was the kimariji for the poems.

-

'So love has that meaning... There were so many love poems...'

Chihaya got off at K Station. Her cheeks were hot, as if she had a fever. She held hands with Michiru so that they wouldn't get lost and went through the crowd towards a shopping plaza.

Michiru said earnestly, 'Waka have deep meanings that remain in the hearts of people they touch, so that's why they remain now, right? Even after a millennium.'

Chihaya cocked her head, which made Michiru laugh slightly.

'Well, it's fine. Thinking at length about something like love will just make me embarrassed.'

'Hahaha, that's just like you, Chihaya-chan. I like that part of you.'

Michiru's words didn't appear to reach Chihaya, who had started running when she spotted a sign on the outside of the building that had Teddy Bear on it.

Chihaya energetically ran towards the character shop building. There were many official character shops on each floor, like a kingdom of dreams.

Then, ten minutes later...

'So cuuuuuute! That, and this, ah, and that too!' yelled Chihaya, clutching numerous Daddy Bear goods to her chest. At a step... ten steps back, Michiru was watching her with a smile. Cute... or not, that was up to taste, but Chihaya didn't know that Michiru was thinking that.

Chihaya bought Daddy Bear goods for Inaba and Yamabe too, since she had promised to play karuta again with Inaba.

However, after school the next day, when Chihaya went to Inaba's classroom with a Daddy Bear eraser in hand – Yamabe ran out and spoke in a low voice, glaring sharply.

'Don't come, Chihaya. Don't bother us any more.'

'Wait, Nonoka.'

Inaba dragged her feet over as quickly as she could.

'It's because you're so wishy-washy that selfish kids like this stick with you. If you don't like it, tell her clearly not to come!'

'No, I...'

Ignoring Inaba's words, Chihaya continued yelling at Chihaya.

'Got this, Chihaya? Because you knocked that desk onto Nao, her foot got worse. Are you happy as long as you're happy?'

'Your leg got worse?' Even the carefree Chihaya was shocked. 'I'm sorry – really sorry. I just wanted you to be happy, Inaba-senpai...'

'Kids who can't look out for other people can't make any excuses. It just sounds selfish.'

'Then what should I do so that you'll listen? Inaba-senpai, do you really hate me?'

'Of course she does! Right, Nao? She doesn't want to hear anything you have to say any more!' said Yamabe. She interrupted Inaba, who was shaking her head slightly, and shut the door firmly.

'But... I haven't heard Inaba-senpai's feelings properly yet...' Chihaya sank to the floor.

She returned to her classroom in low spirits. She looked for Michiru, but it seemed she had already

gone to club.

'Inaba-senpai probably won't play karuta with me any more... If Yamabe-senpai is with her... It's true though. I really did too much without thinking.'

Chihaya reflected on her actions as she murmured, counting her mistakes on her fingers.

'It really was bad that I knocked over the desk... How can I stop myself from going that far? I'll think about "Karuta that Senpai can play" – but it has to be "karuta Senpai wants to play", and "karuta where I can't take the love poem cards" – wait, no, before thinking about "karuta we can play", I should figure out what I did wrong so I don't make the same mistake. Er, then what should I do?'

She thought about a number of things... which made her head hurt... and then, she realised there was something she had to do first.

'I wonder how I can at least get them to let me apologise properly.'

Though it wasn't wrapped properly, she had two Daddy Bear erasers in small paper bags. She looked at them in her hand.

'Even though I thought we'd become friends...' she murmured. She vacantly looked out the open window towards the courtyard. A gentle breeze blew through Chihaya's hair.

Members of sports clubs had started to warm up. Chihaya could hear the sound of trumpets and clarinets from the brass band in the music room.

It looked like the track and field club members were gathered near the track's start line. Michiru was there. Yamabe joined her, running up in a jersey.

'Yamabe-senpai...'

Yamabe's running form was beautiful. Yamabe broke through the members running the hundred metres to get into first place. However, after she finished running, she seemed a bit down. The male teacher in charge seemed to be asking her what was wrong.

Yamabe shook her head and said something. Then, she tried to run out of the courtyard with her face turned away. However, the club members surrounded her, and she crouched on the floor.

'Are they having an argument? What's wrong?'

She felt like she heard Yamabe scream, 'I'm sick of this!' Perhaps it was her imagination, but Yamabe looked so pained that Chihaya ran without thinking.

-

Chihaya ran towards the track, not caring that her skirt was a mess.

'Nao's not here, so I... can't race. Even if you tell me I keep saying that... I can't. I could run because Nao was here, and I just can't run like I did before – '

Chihaya could clearly hear Yamabe's pained voice.

'Yamabe-senpai! Er, I – !'

Chihaya was out of breath, so she couldn't speak properly.

Michiru gulped. The older club members looked at her, astonished.

'Get out of the way! Don't step on the track line.'

'Please, um – '

'Get out of here, outsider.'

'Chihaya-chan, if you want to talk, I'll listen later, OK?'

Michiru tried to get Chihaya to leave.

'Do you want to join the club? You came at an amazing speed – you could be a good runner.'

The one who interrupted in a loud voice was the male teacher who was in charge – Seki-sensei from P.E.

'Ah, Class 1-3... Ayase, right? I had an eye on you. If you're not in any other club, join ours.'

Seki-sensei's cheerful voice made Yamabe lift her head, eyes flashing open. Her angry eyes glared at Chihaya.

'Sensei, this kid doesn't want to join the club.'

'Then what is it?'

'That's...'

Yamabe stopped speaking and glared at Chihaya more. Chihaya thought about it a bit, but once she came to a decision, she didn't waver.

'E... er, please let me race. With you, Yamabe-senpai... I think that with people in the track and field club, a competition in track will make things more clear. If I win, please at least listen to my apology – you don't have to accept it.'

'Chihaya, what are you even saying?'

'I realised I can't just do things I like and am good at. That's why I'll do what you're good at, Yamabe-senpai. With Inaba-senpai, I'll play karuta that Inaba-senpai can play and wants to play.'

'Wha!? I don't understand what you're saying.'

(No, that's not it, er...)

Chihaya put her hand on her chest as she looked for the right words.

'I thought that you weren't running with all your heart, Yamabe-senpai. Since Inaba-senpai isn't here. The reason you can't run isn't that you've lost your goals or your base, but probably just because you're holding back, I think, since you're thinking about whether it's OK for you too run by yourself when Inaba-senpai can't – wondering whether you can do what you like.'

For a moment, Yamabe was lost for words, but then, with red cheeks, she retorted, 'What are you saying? What do you mean, I can't run... Where – Horikawa! Did you say something?'

'No, Horikawa-san has nothing to do with it! Really! Please don't drag Horikawa-san into this.'

Chihaya stood in front of Michiru.

'I just heard what you were saying now.'

Seki-sensei's eyes were sparkling. He looked interested.

'OK, do you have a jersey? Get changed and come back here. Yamabe, if you think about things you don't need to and don't take this seriously, you'll lose to Ayase. Relay members, join Yamabe.'

-

It was decided that Chihaya and Yamabe would do a 200-metre sprint.

Yamabe was the furthest out, with three relay members next to her, so Chihaya was the furthest in, where the curve was tough. Michiru sighed beside her, probably because she thought there was nothing she could do to stop this any more.

It was a crouching start.

'On your marks!'

Chihaya watched the others to see how to position herself. She placed both hands on the ground, lowered one knee and took position. Then, she saw Seki-sensei pick up a pistol, which gave her a jolt.

She had completely forgotten how much she hated the loud sound of a gunshot.

(Pistols are scary... I always lose balance when I hear the loud noise, so I'll need to move my body before then... I wonder if I'll be able to hear the sound of the trigger. If I run without hearing anything, that'll be a flying start... and then I'll be out.)

Though it was a bit late, Chihaya was starting to become nervous. Would the trigger make a sound?

(But I feel like I heard it during practice for sports day. A click... E-er, maybe that was the sound of a misfire though.)

'Set!'

Chihaya lifted her waist with her hands still on the ground.

(Listen. To Seki-sensei's breath. Heart. Anything as long as it's before the gunshot.)

Her heartbeat grew louder. Chihaya breathed out to relax, just like she did when she focussed her ears for karuta.

She definitely heard something. Right as Chihaya kicked the ground, the gunshot echoed.

She ran.

She only looked a few steps ahead in her own lane. Her hearing was sharp. She could hear Yamabe's footsteps. Her back was in the corner of her right eye.

(Pass her!)

She turned the curve. It felt like her body was being pulled out, so she put more strength in her legs. However, the back beside her got bigger.

(Go, even if you trip!)

When she saw the finish line, she thought – I've reached the straight line. All she could see was the finish line.

Chihaya ran towards the white tape.

'Ayase and Yamabe are both first... no, just very close – Ayase is second.'

Seki-sensei's voice came down on Chihaya's head like a hammer. She was collapsed on the floor. It was hard to breathe. Her heart hurt. Her throat hurt too. Her feet felt heavy.

'Second...' gasped Chihaya.

'You're really something – you passed three relay members.'

Though Michiru was showing some restraint towards the relay members who were looking at Chihaya with astonished and exhausted faces, she walked up to Chihaya.

'Chihaya-chan, that was a really beautiful start. Are you really a beginner? How do I say it – your response was good, like you didn't hesitate at all to go. It's such a waste! Won't you join track?'

'hm... Maybe I practised jumping out in karuta.'

She had heard something before the gunshot... Probably the sound of the ignition before the gunpowder exploded.

'Will you really not join, Ayase? This time – Yamabe went full speed.'

Seki-sensei looked at Yamabe, who was on the ground, stunned. Yamabe struggled on the ground like

she was saying something.

'I want Yamabe to be able to run with a rival. Inaba is...'

Chihaya looked at Seki-sensei.

'I didn't come because I wanted to replace Inaba-senpai. I don't want to steal Inaba-senpai's place.'

'I see,' replied Seki-sensei. Then, after Chihaya sat up, he patted her on the head.

'Yamabe-senpai, I lost, so... Er, I caused a lot of trouble by suddenly forcing you to do this...'

'What? Don't do this half-heartedly – apologise for everything. Not just for this race – about what happened earlier. I said I wouldn't listen, but after you did this much, I would feel worse not listening.'

'Yes... I did something selfish. I am really sorry!'

Chihaya knelt on the ground and put her head to the floor, repeating the word 'Sorry' so that she wouldn't accidentally say something wrong.

'It's fine already,' Yamabe said quietly. 'If you're going to apologise, apologise to Nao –'

Then, Nao slowly walked up with her crutches in her arms. The club members started murmuring.

Inaba gave Chihaya a slightly strange smile and then looked at everyone. Then, she declared with some hesitation, 'Seki-sensei, I... was told that I won't be able to run like before by the doctor.... I'm retiring from the club. I'm sorry, everyone...'

Inaba bowed her head deeply. Yamabe got up on unsteady feet and clung to her.

'... So what Chihaya did then –'

'No, I was told this before... I just couldn't tell you, since I heard that you were in a slump because of me. I tried to tell you earlier too, but you misunderstood and Chihaya-san came –'

'I... see...'

'I saw Chihaya-san running for me, so I decided that I couldn't hide it or make you worry any more.'

Inaba turned towards Chihaya.

'Thank you, Chihaya-san. I don't hate you –'

Then, she broke down, crying.

'Inaba-senpai!'

The female members of the club called out. Meanwhile, Inaba said in tears, 'I loved running. I loved running with Nonoka and everyone...'

In an even louder voice, Yamabe burst into tears.

For a while, Inaba and Yamabe cried with the other female members, and Chihaya felt like she would cry too from outside the ring of members.

Then, Inaba wiped her tears.

'I'll find something new I want to do. No, I've already found it. Please don't worry!'

Yamabe was still crying. Inaba hugged Yamabe's shoulder and patted her on the back. The club members burst into applause, and Chihaya clapped as much as she could as well.



☆ CHIHAYA ☆
FULL

3 – ima wa tada (the only thing now)

-

Autumn had settled in.

'And then Seki-sensei scolded the second-year who said Inaba-senpai could come back as the manager.'

Chihaya and Michiru were chatting by the window in the classroom during break. Michiru was telling Chihaya what had happened in the track and field club recently.

'He said, "Would you be able to cheer with a real smile on your face when you saw everyone running like normal while you couldn't if you were in Inaba's position?" If you could, you'd be a wonderful person, but it's not that simple. It'd be material for a manga or a TV show.'

'Yeah,' said Chihaya with a nod.

'Then Yamabe-senpai said, "She's found something else she likes, so I'll cheer Nao on," and Seki-sensei agreed. Yamabe-senpai looked like she was going to cry again, but she said that clearly, took a deep breath and then smiled.'

Michiru patted Chihaya on the shoulder.

'Chihaya-chan, we'll leave Inaba-senpai to you.'

'Yueah! I've been thinking about what I can do to help Inaba-senpai, see.'

Chihaya took out the big bag that she had forced into her locker.

'I borrowed this from Harada-sensei at the Shiranami Society.'

Michiru's eyes went wide in surprise, but Chihaya continued emptying the bag regardless.

'A tatami tablecloth. If we put this on the desk, the cards won't slip. Harada-sensei said they used this when they had a karuta performance overseas.'

'That's called a rush mat, not a tablecloth, right?'

'But it's got things to stop it from moving on the bottom.'

Chihaya flipped it over to show the bottom, which had tape on it to stop it from moving, like with bathmats.

'And since standing's better than sitting, I was thinking about big, tall tables that wouldn't flip. There's a dressmaking table in the home ec room which you use to lay out cloth to cut while standing, right? I decided to use that room. And it'd be tough for Inaba-senpai to stand the whole time, so there's

something like a crutch or a chair – a stand. It’s collapsible. It’s like a crutch, but if you do this, you can rest on it.’

When Chihaya sat down on it as an example, Michiru smiled.

-

After school that day, Chihaya briskly invited Inaba and went to the home economics room.

Chihaya laid the tablecloth on the dressmaking table. Then, Inaba showed her the book she had been hiding behind her – *The Book for Winning Hyakunin Isshu Karuta Competitions*. Inaba laughed at Chihaya’s wide eyes.

‘I studied a bit with this book and these ones too.’

Inaba kept taking more books out of her bag. She opened one and showed Chihaya a page.

‘Forty-three of the hundred poems in the Hyakunin Isshu are love poems.’

Inaba took a handwritten list out from the book.

‘Look. I don’t want to hand over cards like this. All of them feel like they were written from the heart. Like this one:

<kimi ga tame
oshi karazarashi
inochi sae
nagaku mo gana to
omoi keru ka na>

(Even the life that
I’d not have been sorry to lose
just to meet you once,
now, having met, I think:
‘I want it to last forever!’)

‘How wonderful!’

‘“Just to meet you once”? Why?’

‘This author was really, really handsome and a son from a very noble family, so he could get anything he wanted. Because of that, he looked down on the whole world and didn’t care about his life before he fell in love, but he met his beloved and started to want to live longer for that person... But he died at twenty-one because of a prevalent disease, leaving his newborn baby boy and his lover behind. Even though he wanted to live, he only lived until twenty-one!’

‘Eh, is that so? That’s so sad.’

‘Isn’t it? It makes you want to protect the card, doesn’t it?’

'Yup, I feel like I understand. Then let's use these forty-three cards and seven more to think about a strategy.'

Chihaya took out cards using the list and thought about a strategy. She didn't worry about placing according to the kimariji – she decided to put the cards Inaba liked in front of her first.

'OK, the bottom row... the cards right in front of you. Protect them well, OK? I'll attack without holding back.'

'OK, I won't lose!'

After fifteen minutes to memorise, Chihaya took the CD player remote controller.

'Inaba-senpai, it's time. Let's begin. I'll play it at random today.'

The first poem was read.

<ai>

(It's 'ai mite no'. Right in front of Senpai!)

Inaba responded. It looked like she had remembered the kimariji for the cards in front of her, at least. Her hand moved. Chihaya's hand moved too.

(I can't sweep them away. I'll press the card. Press it. Press it lightly.)

Chihaya pressed the card closest to Inaba. She stopped herself from forcefully brushing it away. It was one of the things that Chihaya had decided she would be able to do to make it easier for Inaba to take cards.

Their hands overlapped. Inaba's was on top. At times like this, the person whose hand was on the bottom took the card.

'Ah, too bad. This doesn't count as the same time, right? If it's the same time, the person whose row it belongs to can take it.'

'It doesn't count. If I'm too easy on you, Senpai, you won't become stronger.'

Chihaya said the same thing that she had been told at the karuta society, since she thought it was right.

'So strict! But I need to become stronger to protect the cards I like.'

'Somehow, that sounds like a line from some guy in a manga.'

'Yup, I'll protect these princesses. These lovely and graceful princesses who yearn for love.'

Inaba stuck out her chest.

'So cool!'

The two of them laughed. Chihaya sent Inaba a card. Chihaya's speciality, "chihayaburu", though it wasn't a love poem. With a brave smile, Chihaya played the next song.

<araza>

(Senpai's again!)

Inaba was faster this time. Chihaya hit Inaba's right hand.

"Ah!"

'Are you all right, Senpai?'

'I'm fine. Izumi Shikibu is mine. I protected her!'

Inaba hugged the card dramatically with pink cheeks.

'This is it, isn't it? The "interestingness" you talked about, Chihaya-san.'

'Y-yes!'

It got through. Chihaya was moved. The interesting nature of karuta had reached Inaba, who was entranced by the romance of love poems.

(I wanted to play karuta like this with a friend. Karuta that I could use to show how interesting karuta is to a friend. Just like somebody showed me.)

'Let's keep going, Chihaya-san.'

'Yes, here's the next one.'

A chain of three karafuda –

<wasura>

'It's mine!'

Inaba pressed down the card closest to her right hand. Even though 'wasure' was on Chihaya's side, Inaba had pressed down her card without any hesitation before 'ra' could even be heard clearly.

'I... I lost. Senpai, your strategy worked. If you had been wrong, you would have taken the wrong card, right?'

'Eh? This is a strategy? Ah, right, there was "wasure" too.'

'They're called tomofuda – cards that sound similar. Strategy is necessary here.'

'I see. It's fine though. "wasuraruru" is a card I like, so I'll protect it whatever I have to sacrifice. That's what the poem means, after all!'

Inaba realised she was getting ahead of herself and calmed down to ask, 'Is it boring? Playing with me... I mean, I just keep talking about the things I like...'

'Not at all! It's fun hearing about the things people like! It's really fun for me too.'

Those were Chihaya's true feelings. She liked it most when she and everyone around her were engrossed in karuta.

'I'm glad... I feel like I finally understand why you looked like you were having so much fun the first time we played karuta, Chihaya-san.'

When Inaba looked at Chihaya, it made her heart feel warm.

-

Like this, Chihaya and Inaba played karuta in the home economics room every day as the short autumn days passed. Karuta with only cards with love poems.

Chihaya taught Inaba, who had started to be able to protect her cards more frequently, one skill at a time, such as how to attack her opponent's cards and how to draw back her hand after attacking.

Through teaching, Chihaya herself could see the match objectively and felt like she could become stronger and win in the next karuta society practice match. It was strange.

Every day, Inaba took one card and explained the meaning of the love poem before they started to play karuta. Chihaya just responded right then. The meaning didn't really stay with her. If she had to stay, she was just itching to take cards more quickly. Still, the time she spent with Inaba engraved itself deeply into her heart, along with Inaba's warm voice.

* * *

The cherry blossom leaves in the courtyard were a lovely colour. The main road's zelkova trees, the symbol of the town, were dyed beautifully as well. The ginkgo trees were turning yellow too.

After school, Chihaya always went to class 3-4 to pick up Inaba. Yamabe would reluctantly leave the classroom with Inaba and say, 'Chihaya, be careful,' with a stony face.

'The truth is Nonoka's thankful to you too, Chihaya-san,' said Inaba with a smile.

Yamabe turned red. 'It's because Nao's started smiling like she did before. Nothing more, nothing less.'

After mumbling that quickly, Yamabe said, 'I have club,' and ran off.

Chihaya and Inaba played karuta with love poems... The relaxing days continued.

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'Chihaya-san, don't take it!' said Inaba. Chihaya was vigilantly aiming for <koi zo tsumori de / fuchi

to naru nuru> (so my longing has collected / and turned into deep pools).

'Eh? But I'll lose if I don't take it.'

'Lose every once in a while. I can only protect five or six cards from you. That's right – I don't mind letting you have this card if you understand the meaning of this poem.'

Inaba pointed at <konu hito wo> (for the man who doesn't come).

'Please don't make fun of me,' said Chihaya with a pout. Then, the two burst out laughing.

In the end, Chihaya won with a twelve-card difference.

'Once more. Let's play once more today,' said Inaba, full of vigour.

'You won't be tired? The day's short.'

'It's fine. Let's play once more today. And there's something I want to say.'

Inaba started to mix the cards.

'But... Look, the sun's going to set. Walking in the dark is dangerous.'

Inaba looked out the window. She squinted at the sun peeking through the clouds and sighed, sounding reluctant.

'Let's play tomorrow, OK, Senpai?'

'OK... Chihaya-san, the thing I want to say... Thank you for everything up until now. I'm thinking of putting an end to karuta soon. I've learnt how to protect the poems I like, and I'll research techniques on my own after.'

Put an end to karuta? Chihaya couldn't believe her eyes.

'... Eh? You weren't going... to keep going? To keep playing karuta with me...'

Chihaya had thought that she would at least be able to play karuta like this until Inaba's graduation. Her head went blank.

'Don't look like that... I'm in third-year, right? I have to start seriously studying for entrance exams soon. Chihaya-san, I'm really grateful from the bottom of my heart. Thank you.'

Inaba bowed her head politely.

'... You won't keep playing with me...'

Inaba looked apologetic as Chihaya showed her depression.

'Sorry, but my parents and granny both said that I won't be able to get into a high school nearby that I can get to easily with my legs if I don't study more. I think the same way.'

'But that's... That's just...'

Chihaya had tears in her eyes, so Inaba hurriedly opened the *The Book for Winning Hyakunin Isshu Karuta Competitions* book and flipped through the pages.

'It's not like I hate karuta now. I'll keep studying from this book after entering high school. There are strategies that you haven't taught me yet. See here? I need to think about splitting okurifuda and tomofuda right? I need to remember all the cards too – karuta's for smart people, isn't it? Chihaya-san, you're so smart.'

Since Chihaya was so engrossed in karuta that she didn't study, her marks weren't that good. Inaba didn't know that when she spoke, so Chihaya felt even more depressed.

'So Chihaya-san, tomorrow, since it's the last time, please play a serious match with me without giving any advice.'

'A serious... match...'

'I think that's the most I can do in thanks. Sorry to be selfish. Sorry for only playing with love poems... Poems about seasons are important to the people who wrote them too, but... I realised that while reading these karuta books, but I still like love poems the most. Let's compete with love poems.'

'... N... no. I don't want to play a match like that... Playing a match to say goodbye is so sad.'

'Someday, when I get stronger, I'll play with you again, Chihaya-san. I promise.'

'I'm sick of promises to play matches later!'

Chihaya snatched the cards from Inaba and put them in the box. A vein was pulsing on her forehead. Chihaya felt so hot that her whole body might burn. Maybe it was because the setting sun was just peeking through the window.

She hadn't felt this way since the day she said goodbye to Arata... No, since Taichi said goodbye to her.

'It's fine. I am very thankful too.'

'Chihaya-san... Sorry. It was really fun for me. That isn't a lie, and I thought we'd be able to see each other again come spring...'

'It's not that simple... Seeing each other again isn't that simple...'

Then, Chihaya clutched her knees on the floor. Inaba kept apologizing, but then she left, like she couldn't bear to be there.

Chihaya couldn't even cry. Her hot body suddenly froze over.

-

It had become dark.

She noticed that the home economics room door had opened.

'Chihaya-chan? I heard you were still here... from Inaba-senpai.'

It was Michiru's voice. She came in and crouched in front of Chihaya, who had her face buried in her knees.

'Chihaya-chan... you've been doing your best. It's amazing.'

Michiru sat down next to Chihaya and placed a soft hand on top of hers..

'Eh...?'

Chihaya looked up without thinking and saw Michiru smiling there.

'Can I call you Chii-chan too?'

Chii-chan. That had been her nickname among the female friends she had in elementary school, but because Chihaya kept inviting people to play karuta, they stopped calling her that.

'Horikawa-san...'

'Chii-chan.'

'Hori... Michiru... chan.'

'Chii-chan.'

'Michiru-chan!'

Chihaya hugged Michiru tightly.

'Michiru-chan, I can't play karuta any more... I can't play karuta with Inaba-senpai any more...'

Chihaya's tears wouldn't stop. She burst into tears, sobbing loudly.

* * *

After school the next day, Chihaya nervously pressed the doorbell outside Inaba's home.

She had asked for Inaba's address. The residential area had more greenery than Chihaya's, with roads surrounded by flowers and trees and city parks. Inaba's house was a Japanese style one which looked like it had originally been a farm. There were places in the city that still had fields.

When the first ring didn't get a response, Chihaya was about to press the bell once more when –

'Yes?'

The gentle voice of an elderly woman came through the sliding door.

'My name is Ayase Chihaya. I'm from Higashi-Oosato middle School. Could you please let me meet Inaba Nao – '

The sliding door opened. A small-framed and gentle-looking woman probably in her late sixties stood there. Her almond eyes were just like Inaba's, so Chihaya decided that this was her grandmother.

'Chihaya-san? I've heard about you. Come in.'

'Chihaya-san!'

Inaba and Yamabe appeared from behind Inaba's grandmother. Both looked confused. Inaba got a hold of herself quickly.

'You'll play a serious match with me then? Thank you!'

Chihaya nodded.

'I... I'm the one who should say thank you! You wouldn't want to play a serious match at the end if you didn't enjoy playing karuta with me, right?' asked Chihaya, a bit lacking in confidence.

Inaba's hands with in fists as she responded, 'Exactly!'

Inaba had gone forward with so much force that she fell forward towards Chihaya, and the two of them ended up hugging. Yamabe burst into laughter, unable to help herself.

'Nao, you've become a bit like Chihaya somehow.'

-

Chihaya suggested karuta with only forty-three cards – the love poems. Chihaya took thirty and Inaba took thirteen – a seventeen-card handicap. Inaba was allowed to choose the thirteen she wanted.

'You can think of this as fifty-fifty. A competition to see who will win.'

'OK.'

Chihaya put the tatami tablecloth that she had brought on the dining table and the two of them sat opposite each other. Yamabe and Inaba's grandmother watched the match.

'Then I'll give these to you, Chihaya-san.'

The thirty cards Inaba gave Chihaya included the ones that Inaba always protected in front of her.

'Eh? Is this OK? Aren't these the ones you want to protect...'

'It's my strategy.'

With a smile, Inaba looked towards her grandmother.

'I practised this way with my granny. Each time, she changed the position of her cards. Just trying to protect cards will only get me halfway, right? I planned on having a match with you once I was confident in attacking... though it ended up being now.'

'You got me... OK, I'll take that challenge!'

Chihaya pondered over how to place the thirty cards. Since Inaba always just pressed down one card without knocking any away, maybe it would be better to place the cards she liked most separately. Then, Chihaya thought about what to expect – a different position and different attacking style than usual.

'Let's begin the match.'

Yamabe used the music player for them.

<michi>

Chihaya had that card. She pressed it down quickly. Inaba's hand went on top of Chihaya's.

'First card!'

'Ah, you got it! This is frustrating.'

Two karafuda, and then –

'It;chigiriki>

That card was in front of Inaba. Chihaya got this card too.

'This time I'll get it!'

<ima ko>

Inaba's hand reached out at the 'ma' sound and hovered over the 'ima wa' card in Chihaya's top row.

'Eh...'

Chihaya's strategy had been to sweep up the tomofuda together, but Inaba, who didn't like being rough with the cards, didn't do it. Chihaya had let her guard down.

'I said a serious match, didn't I? I've already done what you're thinking.'

Inaba smiled happily and sent the <arima yama> card to Chihaya.

'This is a poem that means, "No, I will not forget you."'

Inaba's eyes told Chihaya that Inaba had wanted to send this card no matter what.

-

The match reached its climax. Chihaya had one card left, while Inaba had three. At points like this, the match was often up to luck depending on which card was read first.

Chihaya was waiting for <nageki tsutsu>. Inaba had <nageki tsutsu>'s tomofuda, <nageke tote>, <se wo hayami,> with a one-syllable kimariji, and <yura no to wo>, which had become a one-syllable kimariji since the other <yu> card had been read.

(If <na> is read, what will Senpai do? She'll probably wait for three syllables to be read. I'll reach out and get it on the way back if I need to.)

<na>

That moment, Inaba took Chihaya's <nageki tsutsu> without any hesitation, crossing chihaya's hand, which was reaching for Inaba's cards.

<geki>

Inaba's gut had been correct.

'I got it! I thought it wouldn't be mine. Michitsuna's mother can't wait any longer – she's been waiting for her husband for so many days, and he doesn't come back often. I felt like a priest would be able to wait.'

'That's...'

Inaba put out <se wo hayami>.

'It means, "Even if we part, let's meet again."'

Chihaya noticed now that each card Inaba sent her had been filled with meaning. they were a message to Chihaya. Chihaya's heart felt warm.

'I'll send you a card too.'

'Eh? Why? It's my turn to give you an okurifuda – '

Chihaya placed a handwritten card that she had been hiding in front of Inaba.

She gave Yamabe the same card. The extra white cards that had always been in the bottom of box were now torifuda for Inaba and Yamabe.

<matsutoshi kikaba
ima kaeri kon>

(if I hear you pine for me
I will return straightaway to you.)

That was the card.

'I was thinking of giving it to you after the match.'

'The Inaba Mountain poem...'

<If I hear that you're waiting, I'll come back right away.>

Before, in the home economics room, Chihaya had said that she thought the "chihayaburu" card was her own.

'Senpai, yours is "tachiwakare / inaba no yama no".'

After Chihaya said that, Inaba explained the meaning of the poem.

'I'm waiting! To hear that you got into high school. Here, charms.'

Inaba and Yamabe lost to Chihaya's energy and took the cards.

'After you pass, please come back to play karuta. Even after you graduate, wherever you go, please play karuta. Autumn and winter are cold for everyone... not just me. In order to be happy in the spring, I have to be a bit lonely first. I don't like it, but I'll bear with it to become really happy.'

'"tsuki mireba
chiji ni mono koso
kanashi kere
waga mi hitotsu no
aki ni wa aranedo"

(When I look at the moon,
I am overcome by the sadness
of a thousand, thousand things –
even though it is not fall
for me alone.)

"yamazato wa
fuyu zo sabishisa
masari keru
hitome mo kusa mo
karenu to omoeba"

(In the mountain village,
it is in winter that my loneliness
increases most,
when I think how both have dried up,
the grasses and people's visits.)

'Those are the poems, right?' said Inaba's grandmother with a smile. 'You really do know a lot, Chihaya-san. I can't believe you know the meaning of the poems too.'

Eh? Chihaya shook her head furiously, which made Inaba and Yamabe burst out laughing. Chihaya's words and the poems had just happened to match up – it looked like they knew.

'Thank you... No, this isn't fair, I can't see now. This strategy is unfair, I'm so happy...'

Inaba pressed her hands against the corners of her eyes. Yamabe was crying and smiling as she rubbed Chihaya's head.

'Making Nao cry? This is what you get... Don't make me cry too, Chihaya!'

-

The first of the remaining cards to be read after the karafuda was <se wo hayami>. Chihaya took it, determining the match's outcome.

Inaba kept thanking her, and Chihaya did the same. Yamabe and Inaba's grandmother joined in and then soon everyone was in tears.

(I don't want to leave. I want to think that I'll be able to play karuta like this again tomorrow... My chest hurts. But...)

Chihaya, who felt longing, took in a deep breath and stood up from the table.

'Then I'll be leaving now...'

Chihaya turned around. Yamabe called out to her.

'Chihaya, are you really OK?'

'Yup. I'll look for friends to play karuta with me again. I won't give up.'

'You really do like karuta. I kept thinking it, but you really do like it, don't you, Chihaya-san?' murmured Inaba.

Chihaya turned around.

'There's somebody I want to see again no matter what. I won't be able to meet this person unless I become stronger. This person taught me how fun karuta was.'

That's why I'll be fine! Chihaya smiled and bid farewell to the other two.

When Chihaya reached the road, she saw that the leaves of the maple trees by the road had started to turn red. She looked up at the sky through the branches.

(I wonder which way Fukui is...)

Stars illuminated the western sky. The dry north wind was cold, making Chihaya's hands sting, she stuck them into her skirt pockets.

Then, she suddenly spoke in a loud voice.

'Ah! I have to give them the Daddy Bear erasers today!'

She had found them this morning. The ones she had missed the chance to give earlier. Chihaya ran back.

Epilogue - fureru shirayuki (the falling snow)

In October, Kaimeisei Middle School had the midterm exams for the second term. Once again, Taichi, three points from full marks, failed to overcome Hirai. Hirai was one point from full marks as well. Apparently he had made a careless mistake.

Taichi had lost the will to fight with Hirai. He was aiming for full marks. If he got full marks, the result would come automatically.

The day after the marks were posted, they had a classical literature lecture. At some point, Taichi had started to look forward to Fujiwara-sensei's eloquence.

'Today, we will analyse the first episode – that is, the very beginning – of Ise Monogatari. The story begins with the protagonist just having had his genpuku – a coming-of-age-ceremony – and goes to his death. At each stage, the situation is explained through waka and we see the flow of the whole story, with other characters' stories weaved in as well.'

Then, to explain why he hadn't explained the very beginning until now, Fujiwara-sensei turned serious.

'When the young protagonist was going falconing, he tried to hit on a pair of beautiful sisters that he spotted. I thought that the story was too soon for you students, even if you're the same age. I think the time is about right now.'

Sensei glanced up at them, which made the students on the inclined seats laugh.

'The contents of this episode are a story of a poem that was read instead of a pickup line and the older poem that was received in response. This is that old poem.'

Fujiwara-sensei took a karuta – a Hyakunin Isshu box out of his bag. He took off the cover and read the card on top.

'The card is "michinoku no" (Whose fault is it). The rest is... Mashima-kun?'

After Fujiwara-sensei said Taichi's name, he covered the yomifuda. Me again? That was Taichi's thought as he responded:

'"shinobu mojizuri

tare yue ni
midare some ni
ware naranaku ni””

(that my feelings have begun to tangle
like the tangle-patterned prints
of Shinobu from the distant north?
Since it is not mine, it must be...)

He had left karuta for two months, but still, every day, some impetus would bring the kimariji to his mouth – every time he saw a line of hiragana that was the same, every time they reached his ears.

(Even if I try to forget, I can't. Though it's not like I have to forget...)

'Bravo, that's correct. A beautiful young man, a lady-killer... Now, you might call him a hunk. The character that has held the position of Japan's most good-looking guy for a thousand years, Hikaru Genji – this poem is by the person who was the model for him, Minamoto no Tooru, a noble from the early Heian period. However, Minamoto no Tooru was only three years older than Narihira, so the setting with Narihira using this poem might be a bit contrived. Now, a few people chosen for the Hyakunin Isshu and related to it have appeared in Ise Monogatari. Yes, this one and this one.'

Fujiwara-sensei held up the 'chihayaburu' and the 'tachiwakare' cares.

'The protagonist Narihira and his older brother Yukihiro. Also “tsukuba ne no”. Emperor Youzei was the author, and his mother, Nijou no Kisa. She appears in the Ise Monogatari. She lived in the ninth century.'

Fujiwara-sensei looked at the students. His eyes glinted behind his glasses as he smirked.

'After this, let's move to the tea ceremony room. If any of you win against me, I'll mark your second report more easily. If you lose, I'll be tougher.'

Eeeh!? The students voiced their feelings all at once. However, it appeared that some students had heard from their older brothers or upperclassmen that this was Fujiwara-sensei's custom, so there were some 'Ah, it's come' responses too.

'What kind of match is it?' somebody asked.

'This, this.'

Sensei held the Hyakunin Isshu box up high.

After they moved to the tatami room which was used for tea ceremonies, Fujiwara-sensei asked once more to the students sitting in a corner of the room, 'Then, who will try to win against me?'

Taichi was hesitant. He didn't know how skilled Fujiwara-sensei was. Though he wouldn't mind doing it if Sensei would mark their reports more easily... With everyone's reports riding on this, the feeling of responsibility was heavy.

'Oh, nobody? Nobody wants me to mark his report more easily then? I'll choose somebody... how about you, Hirai-kun?'

A few cold glances went towards the Hirai. Hirai, who could do anything and never lost to anyone, might enjoy losing here, but then Fujiwara-sensei would be tougher when marking their reports.

'Me...? OK, I'll try,' he said hesitantly. Because Hirai was such a curious person, he probably couldn't refuse. Plus, Hirai probably wouldn't have to worry about the report being marked a bit more toughly.

(In a good way and bad, Hirai's dense.)

Hirai went up to the front. Taichi watched him, heart pounding.

'We'll play a genpeisen. Hirai-kun and I will each place fifty cards in front of us – '

Fujiwara-sensei was quick to take the karuta. As the CD player read the poems, he used the kimariji to take the cards before the first half of the poem was finished being read. Hirai had no way of winning – though it seemed he had memorized some poems, he didn't know the kimariji.

(What, I could take cards faster than that. I should've raised my hand.)

Taichi felt irritated. After Sensei had taken about twenty cards in a row, some of the students started booing. This seemed to be a custom as well.

'Sensei, you're too strong.'

'Sensei, you'd definitely win unless you were play one against five or so.'

Fujiwara-sensei was smirking.

'That so? Then somebody who thinks they can...'

'I'll do it!'

Taichi raised his hand right away.

-

Five people including Taichi switched with Hirai, so Fujiwara-sensei continued to play, one against five.

Then – nobody could beat Taichi. Of course, Sensei was included. Since Taichi took the cards right as the kimariji were read, the other four and the watching students were gaping. After Taichi took ten cards in a row, the four students had stopped trying to reach, so it was just between Sensei and Taichi.

Taichi was engrossed. When he protected his ooyamafuda <kimi ga tame wo> with his hand, he felt like he could hear Sensei's sigh, but that was all... He couldn't hear the other students stirring. He was just focussed on the reader's voice coming from the CD player.

The instant the breath of the first sound of the kimariji reached his ear, his arm moved instinctively. This pleasant feeling. When he swept his hand, the cards leapt up. When they cut through the air, it was thrilling.

After Taichi took ten in a row, he took the remaining seventy as well. Sensei was unable to take even one. It was Taichi's overwhelming win.

(I won! Yeah, this is great, it's so fun... Karuta's so fun!)

'Mashima-kun, you are experienced, just as a thought. With that speed, you must have a level in competitive karuta, right?'

'Eh? Ah... I'm... probably... yes.'

If you placed above third at a C-kyuu competition, you were allowed to call yourself a 2-dan.

'Thanks to you, I'll be easier when marking the reports for class 5.'

The students started to applaud and cheer happily – but mostly, it was sparse applause and commotion. The general response was more like 'What? I don't get it.'

Taichi came back to his senses. Chihaya's words came to him.

– 'I told them that I'd go one-to-three against them, but then they just backed off... I wonder why? The speed's fun.'

(I might've done it now...)

His stomach hurt.

Then, he suddenly heard very loud applause. When he looked that way, he saw Hirai clapping his hands with his eyes sparkling. Fujiwara-sensei joined him. With that, the students finally started to applaud in unison. The bell rang, signalling the end of class.

As the students left, Sensei and Taichi cleaned up the cards. Hirai helped without being asked.

'You're amazing, Mashima-kun. How did you play so fast?' asked Hirai.

'There are kimariji – they're the characters that determine which card you're hearing. I memorized them. Then I memorise the position of the torifuda, and I've always had good reflexes.'

'Reflexes! With a game this fast, your reflexes would get much better, wouldn't they?'

Ah. Taichi realised that Hirai was talking about being a goalkeeper. Taichi had never thought about or felt that soccer had any relation to karuta.

'But it's got to be connected to your concentration too. You move your body so quickly – it's amazing. And you guard the cards too.'

'Are you talking about kakoite? That was because there are two cards that start with "kimi ga tame", so the strategy is to at least protect the one closer to you.'

Taichi felt like he'd heard Sensei sigh when he did a kakoite...

(Right, it was the same with Chihaya. When I protected "asaborake a"... she sighed at me.)

Taichi hadn't forgotten. He could remember it vividly, the way he'd protected each and every card. The pleasant tension. His rising concentration.

'I wonder if I'd be able to do it like that too.'

Hirai was looking at Taichi's hands enviously.

'Soccer and karuta's different.'

'That so... I really did think it was amazing though. I want to try... Would you teach me?'

Eh, Hirai!? Taichi's eyes went wide. Then, Fujiwara-sensei clapped a hand on Taichi's shoulder.

'I'd like you to teach me as well. Why not have a karuta circle? Even if it's just one hour a week.'

'Circle? Why not make it a proper club? If we prepare now and apply, we'll be able to have an official one by next year. Fujiwara-sensei, please be our supervisor. Mashima-kun and I will start.'

'All right, I understand. We can use this room. Then, we can have meetings on Wednesday during club time.'

'W-wait a second, I haven't said...'

Hirai and Sensei had already decided everything. Taichi was stunned. His feeling were wavering as his gaze landed on the torifuda he had stretched his hand out for to put in the box.

<nageke tote> and <wasureji no>.

(When Chihaya and I were waiting for the luck of the draw, Chihaya's card was "wasureji no", if I remember correctly.)

Fujiwara-sensei followed Taichi's gaze and took <wasureji no>.

'"wasureji no
yukusue made wa
katakereba"

'"kata" is written with the character used in "hard to bear" – it means difficult. "You said you wouldn't forget, but it will probably be difficult for you to not forget in the future" – a poem that laments the ephemeral quality of promises.'

Taichi's heart was given a jolt.

– 'Because we have karuta... If we continue, we'll see each other again. We'll definitely see each other again.'

Taichi would never forget Chihaya's words back then. Even if he forgot karuta, Chihaya's voice as she said "we'll see each other again" was the one thing he could never forget.

Arata's figure as he started to cry too –

(If I continue karuta, I'll... see them again, eh?)

Fujiwara-sensei put the <wasureji no> card into the box.

'Mashima-kun, when you play karuta, you look incredibly serious and alive. I'm envious. If I were younger, I might have been able to make such an expression as well.'

Sensei's eyes, half covered by his white eyebrows, were kind.

'It seemed like you were really enjoying yourself, Mashima-kun.'

'Yeah, it looked really fun, and you were super serious – I couldn't look away!'

Hirai nodded overenthusiastically.

'It was fun... I really had fun with karuta just now.'

Taichi's heart started thumping now, long after the match had ended. His cheeks were hot.

'When I saw you having so much fun, I thought I really can't beat you in that. Though I wouldn't be able to beat you in karuta speed either. You're definitely the best in this school at karuta, Mashima-kun.'

Ah... That almost escaped Taichi's mouth, but he managed to keep it in.

(There was something I could do better than Hirai. Even though I lost to him in studying and athletics...)

Taichi looked down, worried that his happiness and confusion was apparent on his face.

(Arata was so amazing that Chihaya was enthralled. I was enthralled too. Now, Hirai was enthralled by me... I've done my best in karuta... I really do like it, though I've just realised it now.)

A warm feeling welled up in Taichi's chest.

(It isn't because I beat Hirai. It's because I've realised I like karuta and Hirai said he thinks it's interesting and wants me to teach him... I'm happy.)

Chihaya was probably searching for friends to play karuta with because she wanted somebody to say that to her too – 'That looks fun! I'd be happy if you'd teach me.'

The last “nageke tote” card was put away by Fujiwara-sensei into the box.

'This is by Saigyou right? I know the poem,' murmured Hirai.

'Yes, Saigyou, the priest. Do you understand the “kakochi” in the rest of the poem?

’“kakochi gao naru
waga namida kana”’

Hirai shook his head.

'How about if I change it to the language we use today? “kakotsukeru”. Even though you know the reason in your heart, you blame someone else – that’s what it means. With this poem, it says the moon is shining coldly and is telling the writer to lament, which is why tears are flowing down his face.’

(‘Even though you know the reason in your heart, you blame someone else.’ – kakochi gao... Even though I didn’t hate karuta...)

Taichi looked up. He stuck out his chest and put a smile on his face.

'My teaching is strict! It’s because I come straight from the Shiranami Society, where we play offensive karuta with nonstop attacks.’

'OK! Then every Wednesday will be karuta circle day then!’

* * *

It was late autumn. The cherry blossom tree’s leaves, dyed vermillion, fluttered through the school courtyard. Chihaya watched absentmindedly.

Her karuta with Inaba had ended.

She had nothing to do after school. Though there were the things she had to do like homework and studying, she didn’t feel like doing it. There was nothing she would enjoy doing or just wanted to do.

She didn’t find new friends to play karuta with. Perhaps Inaba was the only person in this middle school who liked karuta... liked classical literature.

Michiru patted the bored Chihaya on the back.

'Chii-chan, come to the track club! Seki-sensei says you can come any time, and he’s even filled out an order form for a uniform. I’d be really happy if you joined too. Then we can always be together.’

Michiru would say that sometimes, but Chihaya didn’t feel like it.

(I like Michiru, but... it’s not like I like track, and...)

'If you practise the starting dash, it might be useful for karuta, said Seki-sensei.’

'Seki-sensei's really thought of everything... But it feels like I'm being baited, so when I hear that, it just makes me not really want to.'

Michiru smiled wryly. It seemed she felt the same way as Chihaya on the inside.

'Then I'm going to club. See you tomorrow!'

Maybe Michiru would see Seki-sensei's troubled face again because she couldn't get Chihaya to join. When Chihaya thought that, she felt apologetic, but it would be rude for her to go if she didn't actually feel like doing it.

Filling in Michiru's spot, Chihaya's female homeroom teacher walked up to her.

'Here you are, Ayase-san. What is with this list of schools you want to go to!? Write actual school names.'

It was the first time since entering middle school that Chihaya had had to fill out a form with the high schools she wanted to go to. They had to write these and take interviews many times until actually writing the formal ones in third year.

'If you're going to write "a school where I can play karuta", why not research which schools have competitive karuta clubs? You can use the computer in the tech room. I'll allow it.'

'Ah, er... I'm not good with computers. I wonder where...'

(If you're talking about a strong karuta club, Hyoro-kun's school, Kitaou Academy has one, but that's a boys' school. I wonder what high school I can go to play karuta. I've never even thought about high school entrance exams. Inaba-senpai and Yamabe-senpai are probably studying hard right now for those... Will I do that too eventually?)

– 'Karuta's for smart people, isn't it?'

The moment Inaba's face came up in Chihaya's head, she heard Inaba's voice in her ears.

'A school for smart people... I see, smart people are good at memorisation.'

If there were many people like Taichi with good marks, they would definitely play karuta with her. The first friend Chihaya got to play karuta was Taichi. Taichi played with her. Yes, Taichi was the one.

'I'll go to a school for smart people!'

Chihaya's homeroom teacher's eyes went wide in shock.

'You mean a school for students who want to head to university? With your marks, Ayase-, you'll have to work really hard... Anyway, a public one? A private one? I'll give you documents, so decide between the two.'

... Private would probably be impossible. Chihaya herself knew that much.

Her sister, Chitose, had transferred schools in the third term to the arts course of a private middle school and then advanced to the connected high school. The school had expensive fees. Chihaya had overheard her parents talking about how it would be difficult to send another child to a private school with their family finances.

'Public. As close to my home as possible.'

A school for students aiming for university that wouldn't cost much to get to would be good. Chihaya wanted her older sister to be able to do her best at whatever she wanted without worrying about anything.

I see. A top class with dozens of people getting into Tokyo or Kyoto University would be impossible for you. For one that's close to your house, there's the prefectural Mizusawa High School or – '

'I'll choose Mizusawa!'

Michiru was probably aiming for that school too, thought Chihaya. She wanted to go to the same school.

'... The higher your dreams and goals, the better. Work hard. Work really, really hard.'

From that day on, Chihaya studied hard as well so that she would be able to find friends to play karuta with in high school.

However, her mother, rather than being pleased, was worried.

'Chihaya, it's my fault. I've been focusing too much on Chitose so you're studying to make me pay attention to you, right? Studying is good, but you don't have to be so fervent.'

'... In karuta, the smarter you are, the stronger you can become though.'

Her mother sighed in relief. It looked like she thought that her daughter would be fine as long as she loved karuta.

'Harada-sensei did say that. I feel safe leaving you in his hands.'

'That's not it though. Harada-sensei said, "Chihaya-chan, even if your memorisation is the best, you're not the only person at that level. Since everyone is aiming for the top, many people reach that stage. What you need then is reflexes and senergy. Chihaya-chan, you use all your energy in matches and faint right after matches, right? You need to build up your strength.'"

When Chihaya mimicked Harada-sensei's voice, her mother burst out laughing. 'You sound exactly like him! Build up your strength though... that's true. But that makes it sound like some sports club, even though poetry fits under culture. It makes me think of running – it doesn't match at all.'

Running... 'Chi-chan, come to the track club.' Chihaya remembered Michiru's words. You'll build your strength. Instantaneous force too, since you have to hold your breath and sprint for short distances. Practising for the dash at the start might be useful for karuta –

(Build up my strength, eh... But it's not like I want to do exercise. I want to play karuta.)

While losing to the loneliness of not finding a friend to play karuta and feeling beat down, it would take a few more months before Chihaya joined the track club as Michiru asked.

* * *

The town was filled with Christmas songs.

On a day off, Chihaya went shopping on her own to buy a Christmas present for Michiru. Her mother was supposed to come, but her older sister suddenly had work so her mother went with her. Her father always came back late and seemed busy, so Chihaya wanted to let him rest on his days off at least.

Chihaya reached the platform of the nearest station just as the train came in. She got in and spotted somebody completely unexpected in the back of the same car.

(No way... No way. There's no way, right?)

She had wanted to meet him this all time. She had wanted to, but she had forced herself to forget. That was why her chest felt so full right now.

'Taichiii! Aaaah! It's you, Taichi! You're here!'

'Ack! Don't be so loud – you're causing trouble for everyone.'

'It's been so looong! How've you been? Are you studying hard?'

Taichi's expression turned stiff and she looked away. Like Chihaya would let him pretend he didn't know her – she grabbed his sleeve.

'Where are you going?'

'Mock exams.'

'Hey, Taichi, Harada-sensei's applied for B-kyuu for you. He's waiting. He didn't say anything, but I know... You can come back at any time. B-kyuu sounds nice. Arata is B-kyuu too. I want to become B-kyuu soon too.'

Chihaya had said that all at once. Taichi glanced at her, seeming on edge. He looked away again.

'... You don't hate karuta, right?'

Taichi stayed silent.

'At the C-kyuu competition before, I met Hyoro-kun. He was with upperclassmen from the karuta club at Kitaou Academy. The middle school and high school there have their club activities together. Hyoro-kun stopped going to the Shiranami Society, but he's playing karuta at his club inside.'

'Hm.'

A cold reply.

'I'll keep your part of the promise we made with Arata too, so...'

(... Does he think I'm annoying? Won't he listen to me talk about Karuta any more?)

Chihaya went silent in her anxiety. Suddenly, Taichi started chuckling.

'What is it?'

'Hey, Chihaya, I... I've found a friend who'll play karuta with me. We have a karuta circle at school.'

A bright smile. Taichi flicked Chihaya's forehead.

'Eeeeh!? No fair no fair no faiiir! I don't have a karuta friend yet! Karuta really is for smart people.'

In mortification, Chihaya pinched Taichi's cheeks – it was strange, but there were tears welling up in her eyes. Her nose itched and her whole body – not just her chest – felt hot. She couldn't stop the emotions welling up.

'U... uu... tha... than...'

Taichi didn't give up on karuta.

Thank you for continuing to play. Thank you for not forgetting our promise. Chihaya just wanted to say that, but hot tears poured down her cheeks instead.

Taichi frantically held out a handkerchief and stood in front of Chihaya so that the people around them wouldn't see.

'Is it really worth crying over? Here, use this.'

'I... I have... one.'

Chihaya went through her bag.

'Even though you always wiped your mouth with your sleeve in elementary school... What a strange character this is. A drunk old man?'

'N... no... This is Daddy Bear.'

With a Daddy Bear handkerchief in hand, Chihaya kept crying. Taichi patted Chihaya on the head.

'... Karuta's fun, isn't it.'

Chihaya nodded numerous times.

They reached the next station.

'Eh?' said Taichi. 'Look over there. Isn't that the pork bun guy?'

Pork bun?

Chihaya wiped away her tears and looked at where Taichi was pointing – the platform.

'The round guy we played in a team competition. Don't you remember? From Suihaku Society. The guy who lost at the national competition finals to Arata – '

'Ah! That pork bun!'

The roundish boy with a tennis racquet handle sticking out of his sports bag was running along the platform. It looked like he had gotten off this train and was running towards the gates.

'Tennis...?'

Chihaya and Taichi looked at each other.

'It doesn't suit him...'

The boy tripped and his racquet flew out of his bag. The cover fell off and the strings snapped.

'I wonder if he's still playing karuta. I don't see him at the competitions... so he's playing tennis now...' murmured Chihaya. Then, the bell announced that the train was about to start.

'Maybe the pork bun didn't have friends to play karuta with in middle school either.'

'People have their own situations. If he still likes karuta... you might meet him again somewhere someday.'

After returning home from shopping, Chihaya found the next year's New Year's cards on the living room table. Her mother had bought them yesterday. It seemed like her older sister had increased the amount she would send this year as many were prepared.

'New Year's cards already? Right, I need to write to Arata.'

Chihaya had decided to not send Arata letters often. She didn't want to make him worry that she didn't have any friends to talk about karuta with.

She definitely wanted to tell him that Taichi had started a karuta circle though.

Even though it was a day off, Chihaya was alone in the quiet living room – she turned on the TV, took one postcard and looked for a ball pen.

"Happy New Year. Are you well? Though I lost at the C-kyuu competition in September, Taichi won and advanced to B-kyuu and has started a karuta circle at his school – "

The television was playing news.

<It has been snowing since last night in the north, and in some areas, there is too much snow to clear off the roads, which has had an impact on traffic.>

A map of the area from Toyama Prefecture to Kyoto Prefecture along the Japan Sea was shown on the screen.

'Fukui! A lot of snow? We haven't even had our first snow here. And they had heavy rain in the summer too – it sounds tough.'

<The warm days continue, as Fukui's prized daffodils sprout quickly. In order to protect the sprouts from the snow, they are quickly being covered in straw – >

'Is it snowing? No, I'll say, "There was heavy snow in Fukui, right?" And then... What was it with Taichi... Right, right. "asaborake a" and "kimi ga tame wa" – Taichi did a kakoite and I couldn't take it, so right now I'm working on that – '

Chihaya didn't realise that both the cards were about falling snow. On the screen, the northern region continued to be buried in white snow. Snow fell, putting the ground to sleep before spring.

'Oh no! One card isn't enough! One more.'

Chihaya took another post card. There was only a little time left in this year –

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あや せ ち はや
綾瀬千早

小学6年生のとき綿谷新と
出会い、競技かるたの
世界に引き込まれる。
ずばぬけた聴力を持ち、
かるたで才能を発揮する。
公立中学に進学。



ま し ま た い ち
真島太一

千早と仲良くなった新を
ライバル視して、千早に
つづき競技かるたを始める。
成績優秀でスポーツ万能。
私立の進学校・
開明成中学に進学。



わ た や あ ら た
綿谷 新

永世名人を祖父に持ち、
幼いころからかるたの
実力は全国レベル。
小学校を卒業後、祖父の
介護のために家族と一緒に
地元・福井に戻った。

Afterword

-

Thank you very much for picking up the novel version of *Chihayafuru*. My name is Tokiumi. I've written a number of stories for children for Kodansha's Aoitori with classical literature as the focus

I remember first coming across *Chihayafuru* through a review on the internet after the second volume was published. I bought it immediately since it seemed interesting and was entranced. I've been a fan ever since. From the third volume onwards, I've preordered all of them for first day purchases and I have all the anime episodes recorded as well.

That's the sort of fan I am, and I'm actually just a classical literature otaku (though I'm not as knowledgeable as Kana-chan), but I can't believe that that led to the request for me to write the novel version.

Before reading *Chihayafuru*, I had just seen the Meijin and Queen matches on the news during New Year's. I didn't know the rules. I even thought that they were held at Kyoto's Heian Shrine.

-

Before writing, I began by searching through the closet at my parents' home to find the Hyakunin Isshu cards I played with as a child. I liked the princess cards and played bouzu mekuri many times.

Perhaps that was why two of the yomifuda in this set were missing even though all the torifuda were there...

Then I remembered. I, like Chihaya and Shinobu, had my actual name in one of the cards. I was always very embarrassed to hear that card read and didn't want to take the card even in bouzu mekuri.

The reason I didn't have an interest in taking the cards even though I liked classical literature was that I felt differently from Chihaya there, which is unfortunate, haha.

-

When I started writing, I first thought, 'Since I have this chance, there is something I want to know.' It was why such young elementary school characters had become such tough high school students. In the unwritten middle school period, something had happened to make them grow up so splendidly.

Suetsugu Yuki-sensei told me several hidden episodes since I expressed my wish to know more about their middle school period. I enjoyed it, thinking, 'So that's why! I'm lucky to get to hear these secret stories.' Then I became excited again... and to convey that to everyone is my job. Just hearing it and being satisfied by myself would have been no good.

While I was in distress over how to write the story, I was pleased as I slowly started to see the characters, like how a telescope slowly focusses on a distant star. I would be happy if everyone can

also grasp a bit of that.

-

Suetsugu-sensei made a wonderful hint, or rather, request: 'A story that will convey the meaning of the poems.'

When I heard those words – an uta monogatari, or a story spoken through poems – I immediately thought of *Ise Monogatari*. After all, the main character is Ariwara no Narihira, the author of the *Chihayaburu* poem. That was why I thought about having Narihira show up often in this story.

Come to think of it, while I was writing the manuscript, the station closest to Tokyo Skytree, Narihira-bashi Station, was renamed Tokyo Skytree Station for the tower's opening day. Though I'm happy that the city is flourishing, but as a classical literature otaku, I don't want the place where Narihira read a poem at the end of his sentimental journey after meeting a black-headed gull and becoming entranced to be forgotten.

This time, I was a complete amateur in regards to competitive karuta, but I managed to write the practice and match scenes thanks to the many people who helped me with gathering material. Though I have been an author for ten years, I have had much help from many people up until now.

To K-sama, a competitor who told me many experiences which I felt like I could write straight into a story, everyone in the Gyousei Middle School and High School karuta club who let me watch their practice, and the local karuta society and high school karuta club who politely answered all my questions even though I had rudely barged in with my embarrassing lack of knowledge, I am sincerely grateful for all your help.

To everyone related to this work, starting with Suetsugu-sensei, thank you very much for supporting me even though I know so little. Above all else, I must express my greatest thanks to all of my readers for reading this.

If this volume is the Tokyo Episode, the second volume is the Fukui Episode. It is a story about Arata and Yuu in middle school. I would be truly grateful if you would take a look at that as well.

-

Written on an afternoon in the middle of summer, listening to distant thunder drown out the sound of crickets – Tokiumi Yui

小学校六年の綾瀬千早は、福井からの転校生・綿谷新と出会い、競技かるたの世界に魅せられる。

天性の聴力で才能を開花させる千早と、

小学生の全国大会で五年連続で優勝している新、

そして二人を追いかけるようにしてかるたを始めた真島太一。

三人はかるたを通じて、絆を深めていく。

しかし新の祖父が脳溢血で倒れて、新は小学校卒業と

同時に福井に戻ることに。

三人で臨んだ小学校最後の団体戦も終わり、別れの日を迎える。

「かるたを一緒にしてくれて、ありがとう。」

千早も太一も、たぶんもう会えん」と言う新に、

「あたしたちにはかるたがあるから、また会える。続けてたら、

また会える」と千早は答えて……。かけがえのない友だちと交わした大切な

約束を胸に、三人はそれぞれの道を歩み始める。



Afterword By Original Author

-

Hello, this is Suetsugu Yuki.

I am very happy that *Chihayafuru* has been made into a novel, bringing out a new charm.

-

I have been drawing out Chihaya's story in the manga, but I have heard some readers' displeasure at the jump from the elementary school graduation to the high school entrance.

When I started drawing *Chihayafuru*. I had already been able to see the outline of the story until the end, so that shortcut had been necessary to me for balance, but I felt apologetic after hearing people say, 'I wanted to see their middle school period too.'

I felt apologetic because readers who said that were those who were truly interested in Chihaya and the others and held them close to their hearts.

When Tokiumi-sensei expressed the wish to write about Chihaya's middle school period this time, I was excited – so there was another way!

-

'Chihaya and the others probably passed their middle school days this way.' 'I wanted to put an episode like this in, but there was no place to put it in their high school lives.' I gave ideas like that to Tokiumi-sensei.

The storyline has a decided past and future, so to put in the fantasies of the original author without causing any contradictions in three years would be rather difficult... or so I thought, but Tokiumi-sensei very smartly and energetically put in the ideas and brought the characters to life.

Hirai-kun, the rival in the same year that Taichi met in his dark middle school period (that was the image I had of it) is a really charming character, isn't he? I think that it was a very important meeting for Taichi, who had forgotten how to breathe in his gloomy days. The circle setting and the competition with his teacher as well were very fun to read – it was like I had become Taichi. It made me so happy to see things working out for him.

The time Chihaya spent with Inaba-senpai, Yamabe-senpai and Michiru-chan, who became Chihaya's best friend, was also filled with Chihaya-like conflict. When I read Tokiumi-sensei's manuscript, it made me want to draw it in manga-form. She wants to play karuta, but she can't... I would love to draw Chihaya as she tired her best then.

Since 'karuta on a desk' was a theme I've wanted to draw for a while, I was happy to have the chance to draw the illustration.

-

Chihauya's meeting with the character Daddy Bear, which has had a part in shaping her, and Chitose's appearance – they were effectively put together and made me think, 'Oh, I see!' There were a number of scenes like that. I was also able to walk with Chihaya through her middle school life with fresh eyes.

-

Another wish I had with the novel was explanations for the Hyakunin Isshu poems and settings. I wanted to put in the knowledge of the Hyakunin Isshu, since it hasn't been put in at all with the focus on competitive karuta...

I think that those parts have been expressed in a manner that is very easy to understand and that Kana-chan would be very happy with this detailed story as well.

Tokiumi-sensei, thank you for challenging such a difficult story and putting it together so well.

-

The story will continue. Next will be a story about Arata, who has returned to Fukui.

I am also looking forward to meeting Arata in the world of text to see what Arata will face – pain, sadness, loneliness – and what meetings await him.

-

Though this is the end, thank you very much to everyone who has picked up this book. Tokiumi-sensei and the editors, I would like to express my thanks for giving me the chance to carefully look once more at Chihaya's and everyone else's middle school periods.

-

I am truly grateful. I hope that we will be able to meet again.

-

Suetsugu Yuki

Glossary

Competitive karuta vocabulary which appears in this book:

Karuta's Rules

The two people in the competition each take twenty twenty-five of the hundred cards of the Hyakunin Isshu, a classical Japanese waka anthology written by one hundred poets, and line them up in three words in their own area. The remaining fifty cards not used in the competition are called karafuda, or

empty cards. If the player takes one of their cards, the number of the player's cards decreases by one, and if they take one of their opponent's cards, they can send one of their own cards to the opponent, making the number of the player's cards decrease by one. The player wins by removing all of their own cards first.

Unmeisen

A match wherein the player's and the opponent's lines each have one card left.

Ooyamafuda

Special cards that cannot be determined until six syllables are read.

Kakoite

Covering a card so that the opponent cannot take any.

Okurifuda

When the opponent accidentally takes the wrong card or the player takes one of the opponent's cards and can send one of their own cards to the opponent.

Kimariji

A syllable that, once it is read, lets the player determine what card it belongs to.

Genpeisen

A karuta match that uses all one hundred cards.

Double

When the player's card is read and the opponent takes it and the player touches the opponent's card and the player is sent two cards, for accidentally taking the wrong card and also having a card taken by the opponent.

Tomofuda

Cards that have the same kimariji up to a point.